

# A Q&A about DIY with Kathleen Hanna

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Kathleen Hanna is a musician, zine writer, and feminist activist who was at the heart of the riot grrrl movement of the 1990s. This conversation between Ms. Hanna and Don LaCoss unfolded over a couple weeks in June 2010.

Fifth Estate: Is it an exaggeration to say that DIY culture helped to launch and sustain the riot grrrl movement?

Kathleen Hanna: Not at all. The expectation of unpaid female labor meshed incredibly well with DIY ethics, sometimes making DIY a slippery slope in terms of feminist activity.

Fifth Estate: Has digital tech taken DIY culture to the next level?

Kathleen Hanna: The messed up thing is you can work every day from the time you wake up till when you go to sleep making music, writing a blog, booking shows, making videos, starting your own record company, maintaining your social networking and most people will expect to consume what you do for free!

Similarly, it's okay for a Hollywood movie to make tons of money on product placement because it's expected but if a radical artist sells a song to a movie to keep their project going that's seen as hypocritical and thus unacceptable.

Fifth Estate: Has digital tech continued the zine, mutated the zine, or killed it off?

Kathleen Hanna: I think zines and blogs can be friendly cousins and neither needs to kill the other to exist. If you're making a zine in 2010 you aren't trying to communicate your ideas to the most people you can, you are making an art object for a select group of readers, which is a totally valid thing to do.

Fifth Estate: Commenting on this same point, the web site Jezebel brought up the question of aesthetics: "the web sites that host blogs automatically lend a standardized neatness to the work that runs counter to the riot grrrl aesthetic."

Kathleen Hanna: My RG [riot grrrl] aesthetic was not messy at all. I mean my zines were clearly homemade and somewhat personal, but I used white-out to get rid of paste-up lines and stuff. I thought I died and went to heaven when the Kinko's in my town got a copier that had red ink in it.

Fifth Estate: And what about people who don't have regular, reliable access to computers, printers, and the Internet?

Kathleen Hanna: I think it sucks everyone isn't economically equal, but at the same time there are many public places like libraries and schools that people can and do get access to the Internet. Since it takes way less time and energy to make a blog than a zine, ultimately I think blogs are way more egalitarian.

Fifth Estate: I can't decide if all of the YouTube responses to LeTigre's "Deceptacon" video are a positive thing. It's great that folks are expressing themselves in response to the music that moves them and influences them and then posting it up for everyone to see how much fun they are having. But, when it's all over, they are just reacting to your stuff, using much of the same visual language of the original music video, and they are not making their own music and not making their own movies with their own wholly original vision...

Kathleen Hanna: There is this one "Deceptacon" fan video where a skinny 9 year-old girl is talking on a fake cell phone in an exaggerated valley girl accent about losing "like one hundred pounds" in front of a garage door and then her friend shows up and they dance to Deceptacon on a mini-tramp. It's genius.

Fifth Estate: When I was a kid, spending a Saturday afternoon at a couple record stores was always a surefire way to learn new things, read new material, meet new people, and become interested in or inspired by something that I had never heard of before. Can scenes, communities, subcultures, or movements exist; on the Internet? Or have scenes been replaced by “social networking” technology?

Kathleen Hanna: One time I went to a record store and the dudes at the shop happened to be playing “Down by the River” by Neil Young super loud. I worked at a domestic violence shelter at the time and really, really wanted to have a nice relaxing day, so I went to the record store and as I shopped I had to listen to these lyrics played over and over: “Down by the river, I shot my woman Down by the river, I shot my woman Down by the river, I shot my woman.” Don’t get me wrong, I like Neil Young, but that song made me feel pretty fucking unwelcomed. If I had the Internet back then I could of just ordered the Vaselines record I wanted online and then taken a fucking bath.

I guess the upshot is that everything’s a trade-off. In the end, city planners destroying downtown areas by funneling traffic towards shopping malls did more damage to human contact than the Internet did.

Fifth Estate: Another reason for my ambivalence about the relationship between digital tech and DIY is the ease with which the urgency, passion, and legitimacy of personal, grassroots expression can be counterfeited. I’m thinking, for example, of the ways in which the Tea Party claims to be an authentic grassroots “movement” when it is actually an astroturf enterprise run by a couple right-wing corporate-funded foundations and Republican Party bureaucrats.

Kathleen Hanna: I don’t think anyone with half a brain believes the Tea Party is a real thing. To me what’s creepy is viral marketing in chat rooms. Like when a company pays someone to go into a teenage girl chat room and be like “OMG have you tried the new Super Teen Sports Drink, it is so good ! LOL heart emoticon” I think people (especially people younger than me) are super savvy about this stuff

Fifth Estate: I was interested to see your call for submissions to the Bikini Kill Archive blog a while back. Has the response been what you expected?

Kathleen Hanna: Yeah, it’s great to hear how kids who missed us in the 90s are still relating to our music. Also they enter into it without all that crummy 90s baggage.

Fifth Estate: I keep having this nagging feeling that no one has quite figured out how to write about the relationship between music and radical social transformation. Is this what you’re trying to correct by asking women to “share a story of something weird that happened at one of our shows, your immediate reaction to a song we wrote, or how Bikini Kill changed your life...”

Kathleen Hanna: Hmmmm. Weird. There’s nothing on the site that asks “women” for stories, it’s actually for everyone. I’d love it if someone sent in weird scribblings about every show they ever saw us play. That would be perfect. The original idea arose when I was starting to map out my own personal web site (kathleenhanna.com) and I wanted to link to the LeTigre web site, and realized there’s not really anything for Bikini Kill. It just seemed to make more sense to let the definition arise through some sort of free for all.

Fifth Estate: Discussing the Bikini Kill Archive blog project leads me to some questions about your January 2010 donation to NYU’s Fales Library. Just as a zine is an immediate expression of a specific time and place, should we view our historic preservation of those expressions as an extension of that project? Or is history and historical archiving antithetical to the frantic immediacy of the DIY ethos? After all, isn’t the freedom to express and create without the heavy stone of history hanging around your neck a large part of DIY’s appeal?

Kathleen Hanna: I wish being DIY somehow created a shield that protected me from the “heavy stone of history” as you call it, but that just isn’t the case. I didn’t make records and fanzines hoping no one would read them! I wanted to contribute something. DIY, in the best sense, should be about people who are usually left out of history inserting themselves into it. So, of course I want those efforts to survive.

Yes, there’s a part to zine-making that can be frantic but there’s also a part of it that is cold and methodical. It’s like how a song may sound like it is totally falling all over the place oozing sexual abandon, but that doesn’t mean everyone whoever touches the record has to barf on themselves while wearing a thong. Similarly, the project of archiving underground work is not antithetical just because the original work may be frantic and the archiving process is more methodical. My only fear about archiving has to do with archiving something too soon and killing the works potential. I think there’s a myth that RG was like this super big deal that everyone is clamoring to help

archive or something. In reality it was/is treated like a big flicking joke in many circles and we are incredibly lucky to have found an institution that, in this economy, is willing to create a vibrant radical archive for this work.

Fifth Estate: Are you worried that locking away all this stuff in an academic library with restricted access contradicts some of the DIY principles at the heart of what you were doing from 1989 to 1996?

Kathleen Hanna: At the risk of sounding defensive “locking away all this stuff in an academic library with restricted access” sounds better to me than having it deteriorating in my basement where NO ONE has access to it. Sadly, because of the Internet, it really has to be like this because if it was opened up to everyone, people would just use digital cameras and put stuff on the Internet which to me is kind of gross. I put stuff in the archive that is embarrassing, i.e. bad bloody underwear poetry from my Feminist 101 phase that I do not want put on the Internet and decontextualized so it looks like I was writing shitty bloody underwear poetry yesterday.

Fifth Estate: Is DIY about transformation? If so, how would you characterize this “transformation”? Is DIY culture political, apolitical, or anti-political?

Kathleen Hanna: I think DIY can be transformative, but creating instead of just consuming is the tip of the iceberg. If we seize the means of production, so to speak, and just create the same bullshit, then all we are doing is creating small start-up companies that will eventually be swallowed by “the machine”.

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