

In fear of music

An Interview with Janet Weiss

by Sushila Mesquita and Ulli Mayer

"When you are in a band for this long, you hear things like 'Oh, I already like Sleater-Kinney and I know exactly what they sound like' ... we wanted to prove to ourselves that we were capable of going beyond ourselves."

Carrie Brownstein, guitarist and vocalist

Performing under the name Sleater-Kinney, Corin Tucker, Carrie Brownstein and Janet Weiss tend to make people uncomfortable. Taking up the fight against music as a simple entertainment product, or protesting against female rock musicians being linked and measured to their male buddies - this band calls for a sound that has no gender.

On their last visit to Austria in 2005, and before the bands' decision to go on indefinite hiatus in summer 2006, Ulli Mayer and Sushila Mesquita talked to drummer Janet Weiss about the political impact of their music, the importance of independent feminist movements, and the working process for The Woods.

Ulli Mayer/Sushila Mesquita: Do you feel there is an impact from Ladyfest in your community? Here in Europe the festival has really brought people together.

Janet Weiss: I think Ladyfest achieved and is still achieving the goal we set out for it: that people in their own communities would take up the spirit, start organising themselves, and get local musicians involved. Ladyfest should be different in every city because it should reflect the people and the ideas that are floating around that town. People ask us to play Ladyfest all the

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time in different cities and I say "No, no, get bands from your area, bands that reflect what is going on in your city". In that way, I think it is successful; women just jumped on it and started to learn how to organise a festival - which is not an easy thing - instead of waiting for a show to come. They made it happen for themselves.

UM/SM: What do you think about the end of Mr. Lady Records, which was an independent queer-feminist record label. How did that happen?

Janet Weiss: It is hard to run a small label in America right now. The Indie music scene has become less about your ideals and more about what you look like. Bands on a major label do not operate on the level that Mr. Lady, Kill Rock Stars or Merge do. I think it gets harder when ideas are co-opted into the mainstream, then all the power you have is gone. People are just not interested enough to dig below the surface to the underground level. Mr. Lady was definitely an underground operation. Non-commercial projects are just not surviving; the globalisation of everything has really evened things out. There is nothing extreme anymore. Mr. Lady is a scary idea for many people in the States - that is what was so good about it and made it so vital. It is sad when things like that go away because it is so important. The political state is so pathetic that you just hope some good bands start coming up.

UM/SM: Talking about the political state of music...

Janet Weiss: The ability to change someone watching a show, to make someone want to make their own music and not to choose some Starbucks job, is the most political thing music has. That is what we try to do.

UM/SM: Do you think many people in bands feel the same way as you?

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Janet Weiss: Right now, bands mostly focus on the commercial aspects of their careers, they do not think of music as something totally rebellious and dangerous. I mean, that is why this record (The Woods) was so important for us: no more making soft music that people could relax to. It was hard to be overtly political with words - politics is beyond words, it is down to emotions. We were just frantic, like "This really sucks!" All we wanted was to make something aggressive and not passive. The three of us were so tired of music that does not challenge; music where you know what is going to happen in the chorus, where there are intimations of bands like Gang of Four but with all the politics and danger taken out of it.

The state of music in America is based in commercialisation, videos and getting your songs on TV-shows. I feel like bands are much more worried about what they look like; it is style over substance. I am waiting for some underground, grassroots rebellious movement to come along. I sure hope it is by women. I always hope that. The situation is bleak, that depresses me and I get sad. We try to keep playing shows and inspiring girls to start playing music. The Rock'n'roll Camp for Girls in Portland has been incredible and has had such an overwhelming response from all over the country. It is obvious that something like this was necessary.

UM/SM: You were talking about being in a band and having a political responsibility. What do you think about Le Tigre's switch to Universal Records? They said they did it mostly because they wanted to spread their topics...

Janet Weiss: I think it was a mistake. The music is what counts; whether you can make your political statement and have control over your image. Some great records come out on major labels - I am not totally against them - but if you have a particular cultural context, as we do, then part of that involves doing things for yourself.

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As women, we have had things done for us our whole lives. In music, people tell you what to do, they do not think you are gonna be able to run your career. Being involved in a major label is part of that, there is no way you have pure freedom. It is just not possible - even if you are Le Tigre and even if you are Kathleen Hanna, who is incredibly powerful. The record (This Island) suffered because of it. I cannot help thinking that it is too much stress: fighting against the person you are shaking hands with.

It is hard not to be involved with corporations in America - unless you are Ian MacKaye; he can do it, he pulls it off. Most people shop at chain stores, the whole country is a giant corporation. I would not want my music to be that close. Maybe in another country I would consider a major label, to get my records out, but in America, I see the alternatives. It would be hard for us to have that many people telling us what to do; I do not know if we could take it. I hope Le Tigre get through to the suburbs and the middle of the country, the places hard to reach on an Indie label. I know why they did it. I can also see that it is stressful for them - let us see what happens, time will tell.

UM/SM: How do you write your songs now that you all live in Portland? Is it easier than before, when Carrie was still living in Olympia, Washington?

Janet Weiss: Well, logistically, yes. This record took a long time to write and it was really challenging, mostly because it is the seventh record and we really liked our last one. We wanted to make something different, something that made people listen and not just sit back and happily pad along. We wanted to make something larger-than-life. Sometimes Carrie and Corin would work on certain parts, bring it to practice, and we would flesh it out and work on what might go with that part. For this record, that is mostly what

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we did. Sometimes, the more uncomfortable we are, the better we are, the better music we make. That is really true and also just mysterious - sometimes things happen and we do not really know why. There is no explaining how we write a song, because we do not have one person that sits down and writes the whole thing.

UM/SM: How much time did you spend in the studio rehearsing the new album?

Janet Weiss: We spent a little over five weeks; the producer [David Fridmann] lives in a remote and rural part of New York. It was very cold, snowy and pretty isolated. All we had was the record, so we focused for sure.

UM/SM: Is that why you called the record The Woods?

Janet Weiss: Sort of, I think it was more that we needed a title that could embody the heaviness of the record. It is kind of dark, heavy and scary in a way.

UM/SM: How does it differ from your other records?

Janet Weiss: Dig Me Out was so powerful - it was extroverted, like a person that talks a lot, it hits you and you know what it means right from the start. Hot Rock was turned in on itself and the songs were long and intricate. It was dark with lots of double-vocals, a very tightly weaved kind of piece. That was our response to Dig Me Out. It is challenging making all these records - you have to dig really deep. On your first record, you just do it, you do not even think about it; but on the seventh, you have to figure out what is going on!

There are a couple of fast songs on The Woods, but it is not as tight. There is more improvisation; with Carrie there are less notes; maybe a little more psychedelic; and Corin sounds more like

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a bass player on this record. It is not like Dig Me Out at all, or like One Beat either - that one sounds teeny tiny compared to the new record. It is like a rock rolling down a hill. We definitely went out on our limit. It was important to us not to play it safe. It is like a different part of us. Music should be really liberating and when you are in a band for a long time, you start to feel like a prisoner. For instance, we made One Beat and we really liked it. It becomes a pressure. We have to go somewhere new and uncomfortable, and it is a little bit scary to get beyond what you have already done.

UM/SM: In what context do you see senses like fear or power, or anger and aggression, as a moment of pop cultural expression?

Janet Weiss: Anger is one of the reasons why people play music, to deal with emotions. I try not to internalise. It is a big problem for women, trying to avoid been seen as a women who gets angry; but you have to make waves sometimes! This is why art is so vital: anger is not something to be ashamed of. When you channel it into something creative, then other people see it and relate to it. It is not negative - you make something out of it. This is what Punk Rock does. This is why music is scary.

Sleater-Kinney, www.sleater-kinney.com

Ladyfest, www.ladyfest.org

Girls Rock!, www.girlsrockcamp.org

Sleater-Kinney Discography (full-length albums)

The Woods	(Sub Pop)	2005. CD/LP.
One Beat	(Kill Rock Stars)	2002. CD/LP.
All Hands		
on the Bad One	(Kill Rock Stars)	2000. CD/LP.
The Hot Rock	(Kill Rock Stars)	1999. CD/LP.

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Dig Me Out	(Kill Rock Stars)	1997. CD/LP.
Call the Doctor	(Chainsaw)	1996. CD/LP.
Sleater-Kinney	(Chainsaw)	1995. CD.