MUSIC

why are there so few female drummers?

Mindy Abovitz of Tom Tom, the female drumming magazine, explains how she wants to upend the music industry.

BY SHARON STEEL

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Mindy Abovitz photographed by Lauren Kallen

Mindy Abovitz conceived *Tom Tom*, a quarterly magazine for and about female drummers, in 2009, after she became a drum instructor at the Willie Mae Rock Camp for Girls in New York City. Teaching young girls how to play the drums was only a part of the experience, which Abovitz says rewired her brain on many levels. "I'm so passionate about what happens to a person when they first sit at a drum set, and what happens two years later. You're a completely transformed human," Abovitz says. "You lead your band into songs. You're creating independence. Your legs are spread open. You're sitting behind your band, but you're supporting them. When you're tracking, you're the first person to lay down the track. That's memory skills, that's you by yourself, with seven microphones on you, and after you drum for four hours you walk away being, like, 'I got it!' There's so much about being a drummer that teaches you how to be a strong person."

TOM TOM
MAGAZINE
A MAGAZINE ABOUT
FEMALE DRUMMERS
ISSUE THREE / SPRING 2010

Issue 3 photographed by Marisa Kurk

Not unlike the way Rookie began as an oracle for teenage girls but is read by a far wider audience, *Tom Tom*, too, was created to celebrate a specific kind of culture and simultaneously offer a community for everyone."I was trying to figure out why, in 2009, we were still being treated the same way, if not worse, then when I was 14 and listening to Bikini Kill," Abovitz says. "I decided that I no longer wanted to participate in the industry as it is. I wanted to change it. " Female drummers provide the platform for Abovitz's large-scale dual mission: To rework media, to change the music industry, and, in the process, offer women and girls equal representation in the arts.

Photography Meg Wachter

Abovitz describes her earliest desire to play the drums as "a kind of visceral need." She grew up in Gainesville, Florida, and spent a year borrowing practice time on friends' kits when they weren't home. Her best friend bought her a drum set for her 21st birthday, and another friend, who at the time played buckets for the punk band Against Me!, gave her spot lessons. It took her many years—too long, she says—to self-identify as a drummer. Now, she encourages women to call themselves what they are from the moment they sit down at a kit.

A MAGAZINE ABOUT FEMALE DRUMMERS
TOM TOM
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BEAT MAKERS ISSUE
GRIMES
ISSUE 9 | SPRING 2012 | USD

Issue 9 photographed by Marisa Kurk

Abovitz runs her magazine with a part-time staff of seven, including designer Marisa Kurk, plus a growing worldwide network of enthusiastic freelancers and volunteers. Since Tom Tom launched seven years ago, it's grown into something much larger than a niche periodical. While Tom Tom is grounded in a feminist mission, Abovitz also touts a symbiotic sociopolitical purpose. "I'm hoping to cover people of all races, ages, parts of the world, degrees of notoriety, skill levels, gender identity," she says. "The future girls and women who are going to play need respect. We pay so much respect to the women who go in the magazine. I hope that translates."

Avishag from Laila photographed by Goni Riskin

Tom Tom's latest issue, dedicated to the theme "Time," covers everything from timekeeping to female drummers at this time in the music industry. The majority of the articles expand on topics so obscure and/or feminist that there's a good chance no mainstream music magazine would ever touch, such as insightful interviews with the New York based MC Miss Eaves and Indian pakhawaj player Chitrangana Agle Reshwal. There's also a first-person essay on the art of practicing by Keeli McCarthy, a drummer who began playing seriously at 39. Past issues, like the "Rebel" Issue, feature an immersive story about the women of Santa Ana's Son Jarocho community, which combines music with activism; and "When Boobs Become The Enemy," a service piece by Chloe Saavedra, the drummer for Chaos Chaos, for which she collected stories about female drummers' bra struggles while playing drums and recommends tried-and-true styles for every cup size.

Batala photographed by Bex Wade

The magazine's visibility and mission continues to be propelled by Abovitz's commitment to live events, which translates into drummer showcases, university talks, and new media panels, plus one-off events like a mini-music festival at the 2014 Frieze Art Fair in conjunction with the artist Naama Tsabar. The Brooklyn Museum will host Tom Tom this March for a museum takeover event called 'The Oral History of the Female Drummer,' for which a group of female drummers (including Kiran Gandhi from M.I.A.'s band) will be installed in different galleries and engage in a call-and-response with a roving female beatboxer.

Increasing distribution is a priority for Abovitz, along with growing the web site and the magazine's page count. (Tom Tom's main revenue stream comes from advertising and merch sales.) She says she thinks she's had a hand in getting the drum industry to consider women five percent more than they did when *Tom Tom* began, but there's still more work to be done. Now, Abovitz teaches a course about "how to take over the media" at Rock Camp, and mentors other female musicians who decided to launch their own publications because of *Tom Tom*, like *She Shreds*, a Portland-based magazine dedicated to female guitarists. "What I can say for certain that has changed is that the drum industry is a bit more aware of female drummers. But I want them to be acutely aware of us," Abovitz says. "I think feminism could be a gateway drug for all other social rights issues. I'm working on drummers right now, and by the time I'm done with that, and the rest of the industry will have been affected, I'll move into guitars, bass, everything. Women and girls need to be represented in every form of music, there's no reason why we shouldn't be."

tomtommag.com

The Tom Tom crew at an event at PS1

Credits

Text Sharon Steel

All photography courtesy *Tom Tom* magazine

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