Traversing Sonic and Cyber Scapes

On Becoming a Tech Geek Girl

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I grew up in Windsor, Ontario and in high school my interest in music blossomed into what many people—notably parents and teachers—would call an unhealthy obsession. Finding girls who wanted to go see bands play live shows proved challenging. Few were willing to brave Detroit’s potentially dangerous urban landscape so I resorted to tagging along with a group of boys. We regularly rode the tunnel bus across the border to attend shows at the legendary St. Andrew’s Hall where bands like Nirvana and Green Day played in front of a 1,000 or so teenagers before getting their big breaks. When we weren’t at shows or learning new tricks on our skateboards in the church parking lot, we would drink and mess around with our guitars—usually both. I played bass for a short while but the lines to the latest Nirvana track would get boring pretty quickly so I quit showing up. At least that’s what I told myself at the time. Looking back I think the real reason was that as the only girl in a basement of boys I always felt like a fraud. All those years of piano lessons and music theory classes didn’t amount to much capital when it came to guitars and talking about gear.

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Pre-Internet boom I was barely a user, let alone a creator, of anything tech, computer or Internet related, despite having had a Commodore 64 in the fifth grade. Over the next decade, it—along with its many successors—would serve as nothing more than a faithful typing machine.

In my senior year of high school my best friend’s brother—engineering student geek archetype extraordinaire—tried to explain email to us but we wrote it off as a geek guy engineer thing. We didn’t give it much thought until a few years later when getting online was mandatory for completing assignments in one of our second-year English classes in university. Internet aside—despite graduating with a Communication Studies degree—I did as little as possible on the media production end—just
enough to fulfill my two requirements and get a C in radio production. I wouldn’t have believed it if someone would have told me that one day in the not-too-distant future, at another institution in a state I’d never dreamed of living in, I’d be teaching the class.

In the mid-’90s my new love for electronic/dance music (E/DM) and technology began to converge in unprecedented ways. I might not have been at the forefront of the Internet boom—my dad sprung for 28.8 k modem before I knew what a modem was—but not long after Netscape went public in 1995 I was careening towards

I lived a music infused version of the tech-geek subculture promoted in the 1995 film Hackers. I idolized Kate “Acid Burn” Libby. Not only because she was played by Angelina Jolie or hooked up with the super sexy Dade Murphy/Crash Override at the end—but because she was one of the first sexy, tech-savvy, geek girl, pop culture icons of the time.

My first mid-waves raves net-meet was an influential experience that I continue to carry with me.

After two months and hundreds of emails debating different visions for the event the midwest-raves crew reached some consensus on who would bring what food,
Djing, and all other things techno, all assembled in this one place for the next 12 hours. It was a new and fascinating experience putting faces to all those email addresses and Internet posts. It was also the first time that I had the opportunity to converse with so many women with male-dominated tech-related interests—including Djing, E/DM production, graphic and web design—one of whom would become a great friend once I moved to Iowa City to attend graduate school. Once the sun rose we packed up our gear, say our good byes, and once again dispersed across the American Midwest.

The party was then extended by virtue of its attendees who began to regularly linger on IRC [Internet Relay Chat] from work, school, or anywhere else they happened to be. I’d spend hours logged on from the desktop in my bedroom, engaging in conversation about recent and upcoming parties or the next net-meet, all the while falling in and out of love, and putting off my Master’s thesis until I deleted the IRC client from my hard drive.

Armed with a new-found confidence at the age of 24, I finally moved out of my parents’ house and trusted that I could learn how to do things like program my VCR. I then moved on to a Ph.D. program where I convinced my advisor that I wasn’t leaving without the media production skills that I was afraid to pursue up to this point.

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The next couple of years were kind of a blur. I continued to work diligently on my production skills. I learned to storyboard and practiced using digital video cameras and mini disc recorders while building up my knowledge of editing software like Final Cut Pro and ProTools, all of which required unending patience and critical conversations with my advisor who provided encouragement despite my amateur productions. A short while later I was even asked to teach my newly-acquired skills to undergraduates.

But it wasn’t until the summer of 2003, when I headed out to California to do fieldwork for my Ph.D. dissertation, that I started buying my own records. I set out to interview women who DJ and produce E/DM so I decided it was about time I gave it a try for myself. Up until that point I was a CD junkie and before that a mixed tape head but I hadn’t bought a piece of vinyl since the INXS Kick album in 1987. At the time I considered INXS to be the world’s greatest band ever, undoubtedly because the INXS show my dad took me to that same year was my first ever rock concert experience. I had been surrounded with the techno-speak and the goods—the vinyl, the turntables, mixers, amps, computers, and software—for years but it took nearly a decade for me to make it my own. Back in the mid-’90s it didn’t occur to me that I could DJ, despite the hours I spent hanging out at record stores in Detroit and Toronto while my friends and boyfriends dug through hundreds of record bins. It always felt like their eyes—the male record store clerks and vinyl connoisseurs—were watching me. It made me uncomfortable so I thought it best to stay out of the way of the aspiring male DJs waiting in line to hear the man behind the counter play their picks in the back rooms of places like Play De [Record] on Yonge St. in Toronto. I’ve since wondered, what if I had picked up a stack and handed it to one of those clerks behind the decks? At the time it didn’t seem like a possibility. I feared that he would indignantly ask me who the hell I thought I was taking up his valuable time, and I didn’t have a well prepped answer. So instead I’d read the latest flyers advertising upcoming parties that lined the store counters or wander down Queen Street East shopping for the latest urban street wear fashions.

At the time I didn’t think I could DJ and it was easy to put off since I was a broke student for so many years. I reasoned that I couldn’t afford turntables let alone the constant fresh supply of records that were a must have for any DJ, even those who rarely spun records beyond their bedrooms. I then spent another five years thinking it was too late. Why should I bother at this point, everyone who’s anyone knows that the glory days are long over. By this point all the classic tracks I loved had been pressed onto vinyl, distributed, bought, sold, resold on Ebay and were now collecting dust in basements, replaced by mp3s and newer songs.

My interactions with women in the San Francisco Bay area was a microcosm of a unique time and space where women are not relegated to the margins of music/youth (sub)cultures and technology is not discursively constructed as male. So it was in San Francisco and Berkeley that I began to stumble into record shops and dig into their bins, and for the first time feel like it wasn’t a big deal. Six months later, I dusted off the used turntable I bought a few years earlier and saved up the money to buy a second—even though I had less money as a grad student than I did in my undergraduate years. This was the moment of two firsts in my life: my own pair of decks, industry standard Technics no less, and credit card debt. Six months before graduation I finally felt like a bona fide grad student.

By the time I approached my 30th birthday I had more tech-related projects underway than I could have ever predicted. For starters, a mid-western university had enough faith to hire me to teach courses in digital culture and media production. My daily routine now begins with checking my email followed by a series of google searches seeking the latest tech-related events and news to share with my students. Many of them, the young women especially, express hesitation learning about revolutionary communication technology like wi-fi (short for “wireless fidelity,” the term is used to refer to certain types of wireless local area networks) or how to produce their own audio documentaries. The first time they are faced with media production software their faces are overcome with confusion and in some cases even fear. It’s at this point that I relate the tale of my own uncertainty. Over the course of their undergraduate education they are exposed
to the theories and practical application of new media technologies, they acquire the confidence and skills to edit video, produce audio documentaries, or participated in other media and tech-related projects. In most cases they rise to the challenge and in all cases they learn that a tech-geek girl is somewhere in all of us.

When I’m not teaching I spend most of my time in front of computers in my office even though it’s getting kind of cramped in here. I’ve become involved with documentary work and somehow I keep acquiring more gear: monitors, speakers, hard drives, a new lighting kit. But despite all the tech I’ve still cornered off space for what came before—books printed on paper and Barbie dolls, though newer versions like Beyoncé in her Grammy-winning garb, and extreme sports buff Tori from the Generation Girl series. It’s unfortunate that only Blaine—the lone male doll in the Generation Girl series—comes with a set of turntables but at least Tori’s got a snowboard. It’s long overdue. I’ve also got a soft spot for My Little Ponies—Bowtie in particular—who occupies a permanent place on my desk to the left of my power-book. The red, blue, and violent streaks in her hair mesmerized me long before the advent of the rave days.

Most of the members of the mid-west raves crew have dispersed over the years but in cyberspace we are never out of reach. A few of them even showed up at the opening of my first multi-media installation project in Chicago I completed with a colleague at my new academic home. And while I still listen to EDM it now competes for time with all the other genres of music in my iTunes library.

So, despite the occasional butterflies in my stomach, technological mishaps, and having to work on Friday afternoons, I’ve realized a few things from traversing tech-geek and cyber scapes over the years. I no longer perceive tech-related projects and interests to be beyond my reach and in my teaching I aim to empower young women to adopt a similar vantage point. Traversing tech-related sonic and cyber scapes has enabled me to fit into my own skin—despite pop culture’s media generated depictions of what qualifies as girly, techy, or lady like in the oughts.

Rebekah Farrugia received her doctorate from the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Iowa in 2004. She is currently a media studies professor in the School of Communication at Western Michigan University where she teaches classes in the areas of media studies, digital culture, freedom of expression, and popular music, and media production. As a (mostly) reformed raver, these days she’s more likely to be found DJing in her bedroom or attending a Wilco show than getting down on the dance floor. When she finds herself in tech overload she reverts to low-tech activities like soap-making and scrapbooking.

France Boucher

Lionnes Lucides

une femme avance
dans l’inhabituelle plénitude
d’être là
au cœur de son essence

le sang fouetté
par de nouveaux filons
elle marche
avec ravissement

son courage gravit
pour ses pareilles
un à un
les échelons de l’égalité

tout à fait vivantes
majuscules même
leurs luttes l’accompagnent

à sa porte
veille un canari
la protégeant du grisou

finement inquiète
son âme colore
les moments plus sombres
de ses multiples audaces

lionnes lucides
nous mordons toutes
à la même soif

vigies sensibles
dans sa foulée
nous portons le flambeau.