

# Saying The F-Word

## Feminism, Indie-Rock Style

DANA AYOTTE AND JACQUELINE GULLION

*Inspirées par le « rock », les Stunts dès 1999 ont été la seule formation musicale à Vancouver de lesbiennes « indie-rock » jusqu'en 2004. Leur politique de participation leur a permis de collaborer avec les jeunes femmes et les inspirer à créer une musique qui utilise le « punk rock » comme un exutoire et une façon de s'exprimer et de résister au sexisme.*

The Stunts formed in 1999, eventually becoming Vancouver's only lesbian indie-rock band. Performing together until 2004, this power trio consisted of Dana Ayotte (vocals, bass), Jacqueline Gullion (guitar, vocals), and Jackie Sidoni (drums). The following is a conversation between Dana Ayotte and Jacqueline Gullion. Lyrical excerpts are taken from the CD *Over It* (SOCAN 2003), available at <http://www.myspace.com/thestuntsvancouver>.

### I Wish

*She stands in front, she sings along, she knows the words to all the songs.*

*Band band girlfriend, band band girlfriend.*

*Jacqueline:* I discovered independent "alternative" rock upon moving from my small-town home to Vancouver at age 19. Since then I have dated independent musicians, helped boyfriends lug guitar amps, sung along at the front of the stage,

clambered up to stage dive, and for most of my twenties wanted to be on the stage. Not beside the stage smiling up at the front man, not selling merch, not getting into shows on the guest list. I wanted to be shouting into the mic, bantering wittily between songs and sweating in the spotlight.

*Dana:* When I joined The Stunts I had recently started volunteering with Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's shelter, a collectively run, woman-only, anti-violence organization where I met Jacqueline. We were working on the rape crisis line and in the transition house on a weekly basis. As a result we brought a shared political vision to the band, even though when we started out we didn't sit down and say, "let's form a feminist band." We were all tired of the endless number of boy-bands in the scene and agreed the band would be woman-only. Songwriting would be collaborative, and everyone would have to push herself past her own self-consciousness to write the earnest, cheesy, painful, truthful, hilarious, and rocking songs about women's lives we all wanted to hear.

*Jacqueline:* After playing together for about a year, we changed from an all woman band to an all-lesbian band as some members were replaced, while others replaced their boyfriends with lesbian girlfriends.

*Dana:* We practiced and played together for another year before we entered a local battle-of-the-bands called SHiNDiG. The Stunts really gelled as a band during this time, and we decided that costumes and a more performance-art take on the rock show was the direction we wanted to go in. Some of our lyrics were angry and crass and occasionally blatantly feminist but we saw it was possible to have fun and deliver a feminist message at the same time.

One of the most entertaining bands to watch during last year's SHiNDiG was the eventual second runner-up, The Stunts. This pop-punk trio was having a blast on stage and it showed. They were having fun. The crowd was having fun. That's the formula for a great show ten times out of ten. (*Discorder Magazine*, 246, November 2003)

*Dana:* Many of our fans simply liked our music or loved us and came out to our shows to support us. Sometimes these were coworkers from our various jobs, sometimes they were our punk-rock friends. Often they were our rugby teammates and occasionally our ex-husbands. They played us on their college radio programs and bought our CD, they



*The Stunts give their best Stockwell Day impersonations. Hallowe'en, 2000.*



*Dressed in ballet tutus and rocking out with their frocks out, The Stunts perform at the Marine Club, Vancouver, BC, May 2003.*

invited us to play shows with them and came to every show. They stood in front, they sang along and they knew the words to all the songs.

*Jacqueline:* The rocker boyfriend whom I left for my radical lesbian future not only bought me my first guitar, but loaned The Stunts his gear for years, and provided straight-up advice from one rocker to another. The men in our lives encouraged our woman-only project with practical support and showed up at shows without sexualizing, undermining, interfering with, or patronizing our efforts. We appreciate this as our due and expect nothing less for other women making feminist art.

Women loved The Stunts. They came to see women on stage, to dance instead of standing on the fringes of a male mosh pit, laughed along with our inside lesbo jokes, and loved that we were naming names in our songs about the men who pained us.

*Dana:* Our shows included a Halloween party in a metalworking studio and a film opening at Gallery Gachet for Nikola Marin's *Coming and Going to Paris*, which featured the Stunts on the soundtrack. In other shows we shared the stage with crusty punk rock bands and once played a heavy metal house party in Nelson, B.C. We performed in Victoria with queer performance

artist Nomy Lamm. We organized Rock Out With Your Frock Out in honour of Jacqueline's 30th birthday where The Stunts wore tutus dusted off from my early teenage ballet days. Finding ourselves in the final round of SHiNDiG we realized that we had come a long way from our first show in Jacqueline's living room.

The costumes we selected were often a parody of women's roles (Brownies, lady Naval officers, gym teachers) or a mockery of political figures (Stockwell Day) or sometimes they were just off-the-wall (mad scientists, masked superheroes). The costumes provided another way for us to express our politics in a fun and entertaining way.

#### **Mr. Magic Thumb**

*Was it boyish charm or sneering mirth?*

*You were so smug while she doubted her self-worth.*

*Never knew if she was pretty, ugly, lucky, sulky*

*Now nothing's funny anymore.*

*Dana:* In the beginning I felt uncertain about how to present ourselves. Should we label our band as feminist? I knew of only one other band at the time that openly identified as feminist (Le Tigre). Though they inspired me the fear of being marginalized as a feminist band (in addition to the easy dismissal of "chick" bands) kept us from doing so at first. But we had a desire to be known as a political band and eventually we made a conscious decision to describe ourselves as such.

In the opinion of "indie-rock dyke band" and recent SHiNDiG finalists The Stunts, Riot Grrrl never really ended.... While their own project is "intentionally a political band," they believe that Riot Grrrl opened up the rock scene for a large spectrum of women in music. As Dana said "There are a lot of newer bands that aren't

as overtly feminist. Their lyrics may not be feminist, and they may not identify as feminist, but they still came out of that movement, and they still provide inspiration for women in rock music.” (“After the Riot,” *Discorder Magazine*, 238, March 2003)

*Dana:* As a political band we were excited when we got to share the stage with Submission Hold and Che: Chapter 127, both local bands known for their anti-capitalist, antiestablishment politics and social justice bent. It became clear that we had established ourselves as a political band when we were called upon to play May Day events two years running, were asked to play a fundraiser for Environmental Youth Alliance, and when we performed at Under the Volcano, a local political music festival.

A particular joy for me was the collaborative and supportive way of working together that the Stunts developed. With Jacqueline and I participating in a feminist collective, this provided us with the confidence and self-assurance to write and perform feminist lyrics and to present ourselves openly as a feminist indie-rock dyke band. It also allowed us to collaborate from a place of shared politics, and gave us a means of communicating ideas with mutual respect. All of us contributed to the writing of the music and shared the credit for it equally.

Hearing women’s stories on the crisis line and in the transition house often made us angry and inspired us to continue writing strong, feminist lyrics. Occasionally we were accused of being “too angry,” but we knew that our anger was justified, and what better outlet than punk rock?

#### Read My Lips

*My boss’ name is Justin,  
Sexual harasser and cretin.  
Masturbate to this you bastard,  
Masturbate to this you bastard.  
I think he looks at my little*

*boobs,  
I know he gets off on my phone  
voice.  
Masturbate to this you bastard,  
Masturbate to this you bastard.*

*Jacqueline:* When organizing shows, we actively sought out other women-only and pro-feminist bands. We were inspired by women in rock who came before us. As a band we hoped to inspire young women to create music and use punk rock as an outlet and a way to resist sexism and express themselves.

I see [Riot Grrl] as a way for young women to discover feminism; a cultural manifestation. I was 19 years old in 1991, and I was like, “Kathleen Hanna, where have you been all my life?” She’s still around, playing in Le Tigre and being very feminist, so I don’t think Riot Grrrl died. What happened to Riot Grrrl was the same thing that happened to feminism. It was undermined, attacked, and has moved on. (“After the Riot,” *Discorder Magazine*, no. 238, March 2003)

#### Anthem

*Well we all make judgments, sister.  
You just won’t say yours out loud.  
Instead you leave me all alone to  
fight your finger pointing crowd.*

*Jacqueline:* Playing rock shows with The Stunts were some of the most fun and zany moments of my adult life. Two out of three of us were organized radical feminist activists, so we were a lightning rod in a climate of anti-feminist backlash. The Stunts, the only all-lesbian indie-rock band in Vancouver, were banned from playing several queer-punk shows. Queerpunk bands planning to play with us were threatened with boycotts of their shows if The Stunts shared the bill. So, you might ask, what was so threatening about

three dykes in goofy outfits? Perhaps it was that sometimes we were painfully out of tune (occasionally I hollered “close enough” and launched into a song without tuning). Maybe it was because some of our songs were overly earnest. Maybe there was some misconception that by once dressing as Stockwell Day we had meant to indicate our support for his controversial right-wing politics (not very likely!).

*Dana:* In fact it was the radical feminist politics of Rape Relief that were at the center of controversy. The organization’s determination to choose its own members from among folks born and raised as women, and to operate a women-only transition house and rape crisis center had come under fire. (To learn more about this political herstory visit [www.rapereliefshelter.bc.ca/issues.htm](http://www.rapereliefshelter.bc.ca/issues.htm).) As longtime collective members of Vancouver Rape Relief we were considered to be representatives of the organization in the communities we moved in, and rightly so. We were active participants in the praxis of feminist anti-violence work: contributing to the political theory of rape and feminist organizing by doing the practical, everyday work required to radically change the world by ending rape. So, when Rape Relief’s political strategies were publicly scrutinized, The Stunts felt the impact as a band.

*Jacqueline:* We came to learn (second or third hand, by email, or via lovers and friends who’d had their ears talked off behind our backs) that some Vancouver queerpunks felt that The Stunts created an “unsafe and uninclusive environment.” And they didn’t mean from our hazardous pyrotechnics or fog machine. I came to wish that we did have some pyrotechnics to blast through the fog of backlash against our feminist art and activism.

*Dana:* After four years of working on the crisis line, hearing the word and concept of safety misused in this way was infuriating. Having talked to women who genuinely and liter-

ally were fearing for their lives at the hands of battering men and rapists, the idea that the presence of two feminist anti-violence workers at a rock show would make anyone unsafe was ridiculous. It seemed to be frequently repeated as an easy way to write us off and keep us out.

*Jacqueline:* Half-expecting beer bottles to be hurled at us onstage, we kept on rockin' by writing letters to student papers, posting to local email list serves, and saying that yep, we personally were political organizers at Vancouver Rape Relief, and please feel free to call or email us to set up a time for discussion or to share your point of view.

As a feminist, dyke-rock band, The Stunts were amazed to learn that we were being censored from the Out on Campus events this week at SFU.... As feminists and lesbians we support this [event] and were excited at the opportunity to participate. However, by barring us from playing at Friday's show, it's clear that the Out on Campus collective is...promoting that we fight amongst ourselves rather than providing a space where healthy and fair political debate can take place.

The Stunts ... like to play rock shows and we use these opportunities to show what it means to be fun, feminist and out lesbians...we encourage you to come check us out and see for yourself what we're all about. We hope you might even enjoy the music! (*The Peak*, vol. 9, no. 113, March 3, 2003)

*Dana:* I think one of the greatest frustrations for Jacqueline and I was that we felt we were working very hard as activists, fighting against male violence, standing up for women in court or with the police, taking calls in the middle of the night from women who couldn't sleep due to their anxiety caused by a violent attack or helping to make supper in

the transition house. All the while hearing criticism about our politics from people who were busy forming so-called "radical" knitting circles or organizing political rock shows which included burlesque dancers.

*Jacqueline:* As a woman who walked purposefully but nervously away from heterosexual privilege to live as an out lesbian, it stung to feel like an outlaw in the so-called queer community. As a wannabe punk rocker, attached to punk ethics of community-based DIY art and co-operation, it rankled to be on the business end of a boycott.

*Dana:* Jackie was the only one of us who wasn't working at Rape Relief at that time, but she loyally backed us up, often to her friends who disagreed with our position on women-only space. While she continued to get jabs about her band mates, The Stunts hotline never rang with invitations to star on a float in the queer pride parade. Neither did The Stunts' hotmail account burn up with sincere inquiries or persuasive arguments about woman-only rape crisis centres, dyke-only bands, queer politics, or our next costume plan.

*Jacqueline:* The fog eventually did clear: The Stunts continued with our costume shtick, improved our tuning, wrote catchy new songs calling for revolutionary social change, still fantasized over pyrotechnics and released a CD. Dana and I continued as volunteers Vancouver Rape Relief crisis line. Vancouver's fractious queerpunk scene dissipated, with some of the loudest mouths left gaping as women deserted the sexist men in their queer bands to start dyke-only, woman-only, or solo-woman projects.

#### Over It

*You say you feel nothing these days,*

*Sharp hurt but my choice remains.*

*I'm starting, choosing, I know now.*

*I'm over it.*

*Jacqueline:* As a feminist rape crisis worker I have had many opportunities to speak publicly about my own analysis of the status of women and to talk with other women about our lives. However, the magical thing about pop-punk feminist music like that made by the Stunts was a chance to use the distortion and amplification to speak clearly, personally, and with a sense of humor about the heartbreak, embarrassment, hilarity, and the mundane of our own and our women friends' lives. The Stunts was my first experience as a maker of political art, and I promise myself it won't be the last.

*Dana:* The Stunts developed my confidence as a musician and allowed me to do something I never imagined possible - to play in a rock band! It is my hope that we have inspired other women to use feminist art as a means of resistance. With the simple tools of the indie-rock art form, we could name the names of those who had wronged us or we could recollect the many ways machismo had frustrated us or made love affairs go wrong. Best of all, we could be boldly feminist and outspokenly political, and have fun doing it.

*Dana is a mechanical engineer, musician, artist, writer and radical feminist living in Vancouver. Her art was recently shown at the Vancouver Public Library on the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women. On December 6th she also performed an original monologue as part of the art and activism troupe Herd of Women. In her spare time she enjoys tap dancing and making Ukrainian pysanky.*

*Jacqueline Gullion (Jax) is a radical feminist, a frontline antirape activist with Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's shelter, and corporate hack. Since The Stunts, she has played french horn in a community band and aims to start a feminist marching band.*