

Girls gone metal: Female bands shake up a genre once ruled by males

by Brad Burke

The terms Matt Bahan uses to describe the band Kittie are, in a word, intense.

"Intense," in fact, is one of those terms. As are "blood-curdling," "crazy" and "pure, screaming, bloody metal." That's why Bahan, the morning show host and program director for Peoria, Ill., rock radio station WIXO-FM, courted the Canadian quartet to play the station's Nutcracker V concert at Peoria's Exposition Gardens. Kittie co-headlined with the Chicago band Soil, which shares Kittie's raucous sound and attitude.

Just about the only thing they didn't share is the Expo Gardens' bathroom. Soil is an all-guy group; Kittie's members are women.

GIRLS GONE METAL - Female bands have been in ascension in rock 'n' roll. CNS Photo Illustration by Teresa Hargrove and Chris Grimm. **SHE ROCKS** - Canadian-based and all-female Kittie brings its 'blood curdling' brand of heavy metal to the Illinois concert scene. CNS Photo. Surprised? Don't be. Heavy metal, long viewed as a boys' club, these days features a strong female presence. Kittie's gig at the Nutcracker came shortly before metal band Flyleaf, led by vocalist Lacey Mosley, opened for Disturbed at the Peoria Civic Center.

The trend doesn't stop there. From the murky rock of Evanescence and Lacuna Coil - fronted by Amy Lee and Cristina Scabbia, respectively - to the Swedish death metal outfit Arch Enemy, led by frontwoman Angela Gossow, women are taking center stage in heavy music.

"The girls are out there kind of like going, 'Hey, we can rock just as hard as the guys,'" Bahan said. " ... Heavy metal and rock radio has been missing the female presence, and ... the guys and the girls alike both will welcome women coming back into the fold with open arms if it was creative and different."

Morgan Lander, Kittie's lead singer and guitarist, formed the group with sister Mercedes in the mid-1990s in their hometown of London, Ontario. Since then, she said she has sensed a growing number of women populating the metal genre.

"I think in 2006, it's definitely a lot different than in '99 or 2000," Lander, 24, said in a recent phone interview. "I think the female presence in metal, it's a lot more prevalent now. You have everyone from Evanescence to Lacuna Coil to Arch Enemy, all kinds of bands that have really great female singers. So it's definitely a lot more accepted."

Lander said she has encountered little skepticism from the metal community, although she concedes some probably exists.

"Obviously, there's always going to be that person who believes that a woman's voice doesn't sound right in metal or that sort of thing. And that's totally fine," she said. "You know, we're not playing to those people. I don't know, it's just one of those strange things where you can't please everyone."

Maybe not, but Kittie is off to a promising start. The band - whose current lineup includes the Lander sisters, plus Trish Doan and Tara McLeod - has sold more than 1 million records and toured with the likes of Slipknot. Meanwhile, Flyleaf's latest single, "Fully Alive," has ranked among the top five songs on WIXO "for the last six or seven weeks," according to Bahan.

And if you think it's only ladies listening, think again.

"I don't see a bias with the fans," Bahan said. "The Kittie fans I've seen are just as much guys as they are girls. Actually, more guys than girls. I think they're intrigued that women can rock this hard."

Almost too hard. Women have always been a fixture in rock - from Janis Joplin to Heart to Courtney Love - but the hyperaggressive sounds of groups like Kittie marked a distinct shift toward hard-core metal, Bahan said. He describes Kittie's early albums as "really, really heavy. And when you listened to their music it was like blood-curdling, crazy metal. It was almost unlistenable, their first album."

Like fellow metal groups Disturbed, Godsmack and Mudvayne, Kittie gradually merged mayhem with melody, Bahan said. It's a shift that plays to the group's strength, particularly with vocals. On cuts from Kittie's forthcoming album, "Funeral for Yesterday" (due Feb. 20), Lander's voice is both gruff and gorgeous, growling along with the guitars one second and soaring above them the next.

"We've always prided ourselves on being a band that has really, really heavy elements as well as really, really melodic elements," she said. "And, you know, we're able to blend them together."

That, according to Lander, is what women's role in metal boils down to: It's a matter of music, she said, not gender.

"The point of this band in the first place wasn't to be a female rights advocate," she said. "That was never what we wanted to get across. We were just a bunch of naive teenage girls who loved music and loved playing together and just wanted to do something. We got really, really lucky. There wasn't any motive or politics behind it other than having fun and seeing how far we could take it."

Then again, she's not oblivious to the big picture. Kittie recently formed its own record label, Kiss of Infamy, and the Lander sisters have launched the Poisoned Black clothing line - "clothes for women who aren't women," as Morgan Lander describes it. If their success inspires young women, be it in music, business or in general, she considers that a positive.

"In a way, I think it is our responsibility to be positive and strong role models for, you know, everyone. And show that you can do anything you can put your mind to, and you can be an entrepreneur and you can make

your ideas reality if you want to," she said. "But it's not like we're like, 'Yeah, girls, pick up your guitars' and all that. But if it helps in any way to make the playing fields in metal and in rock a little more equal, then why not, right? You know, it's just another added bonus."

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