

Building a women-centered DJ collective: From San Francisco to Cyberspace to
SisterUSA

Abstract

This article is a case study that explores the women-centered electronic/dance music (E/DM) DJ collective Sister SF. Specifically, it investigates the ways in which Sister SF has established its identity and responded to the inequalities and barriers female DJs experience in the male-dominated E/DM culture. Although the collective's goals reflect a liberal feminist perspective that supports equality between the sexes, Sister SF rejects a feminist label. To build and sustain its identity and the presence of female DJs, Sister SF has adopted practices characteristic of both grassroots do-it-yourself (DIY) collectives and commercial/corporate culture. The collision of practices from these seemingly disparate cultures has created the unique hybrid E/DM DJ collective that is Sister SF.

I begin by tracing the study of women's position on the margins of popular music and more specifically within E/DM culture. I then discuss the need for the establishment of a women-centered DJ space in San Francisco before examining Sister SF's choice to identify explicitly as "not feminist" despite its feminist practices. From here the collective's do-it-yourself goals and underpinnings are explored. Lastly, I address the corporate/commercial practices that extend into Sister SF's management of its expanding nationwide collective known as Sister USA.

Key Words: feminism, DJ, electronic/dance music, Internet, branding

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Introduction

It is close to midnight by the time I get to the club in San Francisco's SOMA district. Once inside I am surprised by the sheer magnitude of the space: three stories of thumping bass beats emanating from the club's four dance floors. Besides a sophisticated light set up, the main dance floor also includes four huge projection screens and a liquid, LED-lit "waterfall wall." The club is close to capacity and the anticipation on the dance floor is radiating as the next DJ steps up behind the turntables. I have been to clubs like this before, packed with people dancing on Saturday nights, in several cities across North American and Western Europe but the conditions of this event are different. The DJ about to play is the first of the three headliners for the night, all of whom happen to be women! It was April 30, 2005 and the main event featured England's DJ Rap, whose performance was preceded by DJ Amber and followed by Queen Agnes B, two local San Francisco DJs and Sister SF residents.¹

An initial web search a few years earlier pinpointed San Francisco as a hub for female DJs in the US. Women in San Francisco had managed to carve out a space for themselves in electronic/dance music (E/DM) culture in ways that were yet to happen elsewhere. In this city it was common to see women DJing at clubs or shopping in local record stores, strewn with flyers advertising their upcoming events. To a large extent the strong presence of women in the local E/DM culture stemmed from the efforts of Sister SF, a women-centered DJ collective.

This case study explores the practices by which Sister SF has established its identity and responded to the inequalities and barriers female DJs experience in the male-dominated E/DM culture. Sister SF is the longest running women-centered E/DM collective in the US and it has been actively creating a space for women in E/DM since it was established in 1997. The collective's raison d'être is to create an environment where the efforts of women DJs are recognized on par with those of men in E/DM culture. As such, their goals and practices reflect a liberal feminist perspective that supports equality between the sexes and yet, Sister SF rejects a feminist label. To build and sustain its identity and the presence of female DJs, Sister SF has adopted practices characteristic of both grassroots do-it-yourself (DIY) collectives and commercial/corporate culture. The collision of practices from these seemingly disparate cultures has created the unique hybrid E/DM DJ collective that is Sister SF.

The argument I introduce here is developed in the following sections. I begin by tracing the study of women's position on the margins of popular music and more specifically within E/DM culture before addressing the establishment of Sister SF and its rejection of a feminist label despite its feminist practices. Next, I explore the collective's DIY practices and goals. Lastly, I examine Sister SF's use of commercial/corporate practices that extend to its management of its expanding nationwide collective under the heading Sister USA.

On popular music's margins

Research on women and popular music has examined women's marginalization in a range of popular music genres including rock, rap, and E/DM (Mavis Bayton 1998; Mina Carson, Tisa Lewis, and Susan M. Shaw 2004; Simon Reynolds and Joy Press

1994; Tricia Rose 1994; Sarah Thornton 1996; Sheila Whiteley 2000). Women are most likely to be found in less powerful positions in music cultures as consumers, fans, and dancers, as opposed to being performers, producers, and managers (Angela McRobbie 1994). Those few girls and women who do fill active roles in music cultures have their participation largely overlooked. In her ethnographic study of punk girls Lorraine Leblanc (1999) argues, “these girls’ lives, experiences, and opinions have remained unarticulated within the subculture, and invisible to the public” (p. 64) despite the fact that punk was primarily culturally rooted in fashion, and thus, dependent on the knowledge and skills of girls (McRobbie 1994). Similar comments have been made about the experiences of women in hip hop (Nancy Guevara 1996; Tricia Rose 1994). As early as 1980, McRobbie called for more confidence among girls in youth cultures so that they could identify and challenge the biases that positioned girls in less advantageous positions than boys in these spaces. Several studies (Mina Carson, Tisa Lewis, and Susan M. Shaw 2004; Rebekah Farrugia 2004; Ednie Kaeh Garrison 2000; Mary Celeste Kearney 2006; Doreen Piano 2003) focus on the ways in which girls and women have organized their own networks and movements in music communities.

The movement to receive the most scholarly attention for its networking strategies and production of counterhegemonic discourses is the Riot Grrrls (Edna Kaeh Garrison 2000; Mary Celester Kearney 2006; Marion Leonard 1997). Emerging in the early 1990s, Riot Grrrls presented challenges to popular ideas of femininity, girlhood, and the notion that technical virtuosity was a prerequisite for participation in rock band culture. Adopting a punk DIY ethic, their music was hard and their lyrics addressed concerns such as eating disorders, traditional forms of female beauty and date rape. They also drew

attention to image and body-related issues by writing the words “slut” and “bitch” on their limbs and midriffs in an attempt to neutralize sexist terms. These practices have been studied for their interpersonal, communicative function (Garrison 2000; Leonard 1997) and more recently in light of the opportunities they provide for identity exploration (Kearney 2006). Nonetheless, in their attempt to maintain an identity in opposition to dominant culture, the Riot Grrrl movement was co-opted by dominant culture. Music journalists explicitly linked it to radio feminism in their efforts to define the movement themselves (Jennifer Bleyer, 2004; Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald 1994; Mary Celeste Kearney 1997). Norma Coates (1997) discusses this loss of control over their own representation as a primary factor that contributes to the positioning of women “on the gendered margins of rock” (p. 55). This argument applies to not only the Riot Grrrls and other women in rock but the overall position of women in popular music. Women continue to be marginalized in all popular music genres in large part because they often have little control over important parts of the industry such as music production, management, and journalism, which are all male dominated. Nonetheless, some progress has been made in terms of women having more control in popular music due to the DIY philosophies of the Women’s Music movement that began in the 1970s and the Riot Grrrls in the 1990s. Both of these movements stressed the importance of women owned and operated record labels and control over representation (Wald 1998) and sound (Boden Sandstrom 2000).

Histories of electronic/dance music

By the late 1980s, E/DM began to materialize in cities such as New York and Chicago that had strong disco music and club followings. The music and scenes quickly

expanded beyond the Midwest and East Coast to locales such as Dallas, Los Angeles, and San Francisco (Dan Sicko 1999). E/DM and rave culture continued to grow and subdivide throughout the remainder of the 1990s; however, the presence, activities, and contributions of women in E/DM beyond the role of dancers or anonymous vocalists on E/DM records (Barbara Bradby 1993) went largely unnoticed.

Most studies of E/DM culture pay little to no attention to women's involvement beyond their role of dancers or party participants, with a few notable exceptions (ie. Bradby 1993; Farrugia 2004; McRobbie 1994). Frequently, women in E/DM have been relegated to the less active and powerful positions of party attendants and club goers, as opposed to organizers or performers (Angela McRobbie 1994; Steve Redhead, Derek Wynne, and Justin O'Connor 1998; Simon Reynolds 1999; Mireille Silcott 1999).

Confirming the distinct masculinity of DJ culture, Reynolds (1999) attests that:

the presence of women on the dance floor is not reflected by the proportion of women in the ranks of professional DJs...This has a lot to do with the homosocial nature of techno: tricks of the trade are passed down from mentors to male acolytes. DJ-ing and sample-based music also go hand in hand with an obsessive 'trainspotter' mentality: the amassing of huge collections of records, the accumulation of exhaustive and arcane information about labels, producers, and auteurs (p. 274).

Other scholars (Will Straw 1997; Sarah Thornton 1996) have also found evidence connecting the informal practices tied to DJing such as record collecting and access to "insider knowledge" and social networks to be much more accessible to men. However, there have been some noteworthy women DJs in E/DM over the years whose

contributions are rarely acknowledged in the writings on E/DM culture. Whether authors offer accounts of E/DM subgenres such as House and Trance (Kai Fikentscher 2000; Timothy Taylor 2001), DJ culture (Ulf Poschardt 1995) or club and rave culture more broadly conceived (Reynolds, 1999; Silcott, 1999), for the most part the stories told are male histories even though increasingly women are choosing to become E/DM DJs.

In light of the research on women in popular music and E/DM more specifically, this paper examines how *Sister SF* has created an identity and maintained a space for female E/DM DJs both online and offline. Of particular importance to this study is how girls and women have been able to participate in public discourse and have their voices heard on their own terms as a result of the ubiquity of home computers and the Internet (Garrison, 2000; Kearney, 2006). Research shows that Internet technologies and the World Wide Web in particular, are valuable tools with which girls and women can create alternative spaces (Amy Koerber 2001; Shauna Pomerantz, Dawn H. Currie & Deirdre M. Kelly 2004). This article builds on research that examines various ways in which women and girls are using the Web to enhance their participation in male dominated spaces.

Method

The research material for this study was gathered using multiple methods including participant observation and face-to-face interviews in the San Francisco Bay Area, and textual analysis of Sister websites. The research material collected via participant observation was a natural extension of the interviews, my long-term interest in E/DM culture and belief in the importance that many cultural studies scholars place on 'just being around' (Paul Willis, 1991). While in the Bay Area I spent time hanging

around record shops and attended several E/DM events featuring women DJs, some of whom were interview participants in this study. The ability to observe DJs in local retail and performance spaces enabled a deep, multidimensional understanding of women's place in the local E/DM culture.

Interviews were conducted with approximately twenty-five women who self-identified as E/DM DJs in the San Francisco Bay Area in the summers of 2003 and 2005. All ten then current members of Sister SF, as well as two previous members who were integral to the establishment of Sister NYC, were interviewed. In 2003, interviews were also conducted with DJs in Portland, OR, a handful of whom were members of Sister PDX. Interviews took place at local clubs, restaurants, parks, and in women's homes. The average interview was between one to two hours long. A semi-structured interview guide (Appendix A) that focused on the challenges and barriers to being a DJ as well as their successes was used. Interviews were recorded onto mini-discs and later transcribed. Participants themselves chose whether they wanted to be identified in the study by their legal names, DJ moniker, or both. Finally, textual analysis was employed to examine the Sister websites because of the importance interviewees attributed to them.

Establishing a women-centered DJ space

Though it is no longer the only one of its kind in the US, Sister SF was the first—and continues to be the longest running—women-centered DJ collective in the country. Several of the most well-known female DJs in the Bay area have been members of Sister SF at some point in their careers. Currently, the collective has additional chapters in Portland (Sister PDX) and New York City (Sister NYC). The expansion of the collective

to other U.S. cities is indicative of Sister SF's widespread impact and the progress it has made toward its goal of establishing a nationwide collective known as Sister USA.

Historically, and to a lesser extent at present, the efforts of women DJs were rarely acknowledged in mainstream DJ culture. For example, of the sixty-five DJs scheduled to play the three-day Detroit Electronic Music Festival in 2000 only five were women. In 2005, 122 DJs were included and yet only four of the performers were women. Despite the festival's growth, the number of women DJs participating shrank. Women continue to be underrepresented in DJ culture and interviewees claim that when they are included it is not uncommon for them to experience a lack of support from male DJs. MC Lindzee, former member of Sister SF and founder of Sister NYC recalls:

[Women] would go to step up to the decks next and then the guy would not even quickly go over the mixer, [which is] the courteous thing to do. Every mixer's different. It doesn't mean you don't know how to use a mixer [it's] just a nice thing to do...[you] still get assholes but it was really bad [before], where they would almost sabotage you (personal interview, May 2005).

Thus, the need for collectives like Sister USA continues to exist given the lack of encouragement and assistance women DJs tend to experience. The formation of Sister SF emerged from the experiences of female Bay area DJs who recognized that they could accomplish much more together than they could individually.

Sister SF remains geographically based in the San Francisco Bay area and was first organized because of the gender biases women DJs were experiencing at the time. Recalling some of the earliest all-women DJ events, long time Sister SF member Polywog explains:

It's about allowing these parties to give these women a chance because at that time, especially trying to break into the rave scene there was no way we would have gotten a gig there. Men would have just laughed at you because it was a time when people were emerging. DJing was still kinda new, a new career path [that was] hard to break in, so this was an opportunity to play, to get heard, and it was really fun (personal interview, May 2005).

These women-organized events in the mid 1990s were crucial to the formation of Sister SF. The collective created an environment of open communication and support—where experience and information was freely circulated—that members had not experienced previously in the local DJ scene.

“We're not raging feminists”: Embodying feminist practices, disavowing the label

In 2005, Sister SF consisted of nine members,² eight of whom were DJs, plus one MC.³ The collective is comprised of women in their 20s and 30s, all of whom are white with the exception of MC Audio Angel. The collective holds monthly meetings where members discuss their recent activities, delegate responsibilities and organize upcoming events. In addition, besides the time they invest in Sister SF, all of the members hold additional work and/or DJ commitments.

To some extent Sister SF self identifies by what the group is not more so than by what it is. Although the group embodies feminist goals and a pro woman standpoint, the collective openly rejects a feminist label. Its mission statement illustrates the group's conflicted relationship to feminism, which is similar to that of other women-centered media collectives including Riot Grrrl zinesters in the US (Kearney, 2006), women's

radio stations in the UK (Caroline Mitchell 2000a), and women's collective radio programming in the US as far back as the 1970s (Susan Carter 2004).

It reads:

SISTER is a place for female DJs to get gigs without bias, providing a supportive, friendly platform for any female DJ, MC or live performer to enjoy their music where gender is not an issue... a place where women are neither fighting to be heard nor imported merely to fulfill a gimmick quotient. We're not raging feminists – we just think it's better to be viewed as a DJ first, and then as a woman, when you're behind the decks.

SISTER is not anti-male at all, it is simply pro-female

(www.sistersf.com/mission).

The collective opposition to feminism is not surprising given the historical context of the time during which the group was established. By the mid 1990s, the feminist backlash that Susan Faludi (1991) argues began in the 1980s was well under way. Regarding women's media collectives specifically, there is evidence of backlash before the 1980s. In 1978, WOMN went on the air in New Haven, CT. It was the first radio station to identify as a woman's station after the second wave feminist movement and despite its feminist content WOMN's management team purposefully avoided giving the station a feminist label so as not to offend any potential listeners (Carter 2004).

According to WOMN's Vice President, the station's feminist content is what led to its downfall within its first year. Although the owner and vice president of WOMN were men, research shows that women in comparable positions elsewhere have made similar

decisions. For example, women participating in women's radio stations in the UK in the 1990s—such as Fem FM in Bristol—also consciously decided not to label their stations feminist out of fear that it would alienate listeners. Mitchell (2000a) claims that this was common of most of the stations at the time because women were anxious not to alienate men.

Women's fears about identifying as feminist has much to do with the public, media constructed identity of feminism beginning with the second wave movement in the 1970s. In an analysis of press coverage of the women's movement in the Netherlands between 1968-1973 Elizabeth A. van Zoonen (1992) concludes that emancipation was treated as a legitimate issue in the press but feminism was not and the movement itself was framed as hostile towards men. Such representations increased in the 1980s and 1990s. Scholars continue to argue that negative portrayals of feminism are common in popular culture and mainstream media outlets discourage girls and women from identifying with feminism and/or adopting feminist politics (Angela McRobbie 2004; Jessica K. Taft 2004). Phrases like “girl power” and pop groups like the Spice Girls (who reunited for a tour in 2007) in vogue at the time Sister SF became a collective in 1996 encouraged young women to reject feminism in favor of a contemporary, postfeminist sensibility. On the surface, such a postfeminist sensibility positions girls and women as in control of their own destinies but does little to change gendered power dynamics at play in the wider culture.

The contradiction in Sister SF's mission statement speaks to the effectiveness of postfeminism. These women claim that they “are not fighting to be heard” despite forming a collective based on the inequalities they experienced as DJs. Examining

popular culture's role in the "undoing of feminism" McRobbie (2004) argues that by presenting feminism as aged and redundant its supporters are seen as equally old and passé, whereas the contemporary, modern female subject is positioned as an individual who has no need for feminist politics. The final sentence of the mission statement advances this point. It is positioned on its own, separate from the rest of the paragraph to emphasize to readers that "SISTER is not anti-male." That the group feels compelled to make such an overt claim illustrates the effectiveness of popular misconceptions of what it means to be a feminist—ie. feminists are raging and man hating.

Ultimately, Sister SF's statement speaks more to contemporary society's continued discomfort and misunderstanding of feminism than it does to the practices of the collective. In this sense Sister SF's statement can be read as a precautionary measure. Common to many women who work in pro-female environments, these women feel compelled to distance themselves from feminism because of the popular, sexist definition of what it means to be a feminist and/or their familiarity with the demise of earlier women's media collectives that have adopted a feminist stance. In her analysis of women's access to radio Carter concludes, "although the voice can be female, the message cannot be gendered feminist if the voice is to remain viable" (2004, p. 180). Thus, by adopting a pro-female stance that is distanced from feminism Sister SF minimizes the potential alienation of prospective fans, booking agents, club owners, or other individuals of any gender who may be put off by a feminist label. The detailed pages of the collective's website, Sister SF.com, illustrates the group's commitment to feminist ideologies and practices. They are dedicated to a women-centered DJ space and the belief that female DJs should have the same access to

information, practices, and spaces as male DJs. Besides showcasing current Sister SF residents, the site functions as an encyclopedia on E/DM and DJ culture. The site also makes available information rich in subcultural capital that is generally shared discriminately and hence reserved for people “in the know.” A noteworthy example is the availability of sample booking contracts on the site for anyone’s perusal. In addition, the “Guest DJs” section includes the bios of over 70 women DJs around the world, and for the novice to E/DM culture and/or DJing the site also houses an extensive database of in-group terminology and definitions that are usually learned gradually via long term participation in the culture. Both the quality and quantity of information available at Sister SF.com work to create a space committed to knowledge distribution, education, and networking to increase the presence of women in E/DM DJ culture. Collectively, these features reflect a feminist practice because they afford women DJs agency in E/DM culture. By offering a space where they can write themselves into DJ culture via their bios and exchange life experiences with other women in the network Sister SF is an empowering women with the language and knowledge needed to intervene in the male dominated E/DM culture, which historically has paid little attention to the efforts of women DJs.

Furthermore, content areas of the site such as resource sharing and DJ profiles encourage communication between individuals and groups across geographical boundaries. Such practices have led to networking and empowering opportunities for members and non-members alike. In the words of Annie Shaw (known in the DJ community as XJS), Sister SF.com stands out among the thousands of DJ websites because:

Most DJ sites out there are not set up for sharing information; I mean that's not the point of them at all. I think that it is pretty unusual for a site to share contracts and as much information and help as you need...we're not just promoting ourselves, we're trying to share information, we're trying to build up other woman DJs, like here put your bio on our site. Altruism is not a key word in the DJ scene at all, it's really like "no, me first" normally, plus we're promoting a gender instead of a genre (personal interview, July 2003).

XJS's comments could be interpreted as contradictory to the mission statement's anti-feminist position. Whereas the mission statement makes a point to state that a DJ's sex or gender is not as important as her DJ skills, XJS stresses that Sister SF is promoting a gender instead of a particular genre of music. Promoting the activities and skills of other women in E/DM is central to Sister SF's agenda. The contradiction between XJS's statement and the collective's mission statement signals the tension that is often experienced by women in male dominated spaces. Women in E/DM experience a similar conflict to women in rock. Many women shun the label "women in rock" despite being able to identify instances in their lives and careers when their gender had an impact on their experiences (Carson, Lewis, & Shaw 2004). For many women in popular music—be it rock, E/DM, or other genres—ideally gender would be irrelevant to their experiences, but it is precisely because of gender issues that collectives like Sister SF exist.

DIY goals and underpinnings

As noted in the introduction, Sister SF embodies elements of both DIY and commercial culture that are traditionally considered antithetical to one another. However, Sister SF members attribute the collective's success to its incorporation of

practices from both of these cultures. For example, when asked what she likes best about being a member of Sister SF, DJ Amber replied:

There's a lot of things that are attractive about being part of the collective. What I like best about it is that it has such a polished and clean and professional image...we spend a huge amount of time being a resource on our website and working to promote other DJs, not just us, in the end it ends up coming back to us (personal interview, July 2003).

Amber's response suggests that Sister SF members feel they benefit from merging philosophies and practices of DIY community and mainstream professional culture. By claiming that "it ends up coming back to us" Amber is referring to the recognition that Sister SF has gained in the larger E/DM community.

Sister SF's commitment to a DIY ethic is evident from the collective's commitment to creating an alternative space for women DJs both online and offline. In both spaces they are dedicated to heightening the visibility of women DJs. Sister's efforts have created another node of what Doreen Piano (2003) calls a "subcultural infrastructure." Piano (2003) defines this infrastructure as post-Riot Grrrl DIY cottage industries that include the production of goods such as music, zines, soap, and alternative menstrual products. A key element of Sister SF's subcultural infrastructure includes hosting events that feature women DJs⁴ to give them visibility. In addition, members produce fundraising events for local non-profits, and on occasion they offer free DJ clinics where they teach the basics of DJing so that others can benefit from their expertise. One of the founding members of Sister PDX, Layla, credits Sister SF and their

web based presence for inspiring her to start a women-centered DJ collective in Portland, OR:

I sat down and got to talking with them in 2001...I was inspired by them...I'd been surfing the web for female collectives. I went onto Google and punched in female DJs or something like that (personal interview, July 2003).

Layla's experience speaks to the significance and impact that groups like Sister SF can have on other aspiring DJs by having a presence both online and offline.

Online the collective freely distributes "insider" information, lists helpful resources, and posts information rich articles on topics such as "Making a CD," "Promoting Events," and "Forming a DJ Crew," all of which collectively encourage networking and more active participation in DJ culture through grassroots practices. For example, Sister SF's inclusion of a "bios" section on its website further illustrates its commitment to women DJs outside of the collective. Heather Reagan (DJ Ara) is a Bay area DJ not directly affiliated with Sister SF who claims that she does not put much effort into promoting herself. Nonetheless, when given the opportunity she posted a guest page on the site that led to valuable networking opportunities and even an out-of-state booking in Texas. In her words:

The site has been the key; I got my first out of state gig from someone who was cruising the *Sister SF* site who wanted a Trance DJ so they e-mailed me. At first I thought it was a joke so I didn't email him back. I asked all my friends, what should I tell him I charge? So I had a friend who's been traveling doing DJing and he's like "just tell him you play for this much and they have to pay your airfare and hotel." I thought long shot. He's going to say no way because I didn't have

that much of a background. Then he emailed me back, ‘ok do you have an agreement’ and then I thought oh my gosh I really have to have something. So I got the agreement off the sister website and tailored it and I got the gig in El Paso, Texas. It was amazing. It was the best party I've ever played at. [sic]

DJ Ara’s initial thought that the email request she received was a prank speaks to the lack of confidence she had in her ability to secure payment as a DJ prior to this event. In turn, she had not invested energy into acquiring the necessary “insider information” to secure a booking contract. DJ Ara’s experiences demonstrate the far-reaching impact that collectives like Sister SF can have for helping women make the transition to a more professional level of DJing that is reached once DJs begin to receive payment for their performances.

The overwhelming majority of booking agents, event managers, and club owners with an interest in DJ culture are men. As such, it is important for Sister SF to present an image that is appealing to women, men, and more generally, mainstream music and club cultures. Sister SF has adopted strategies that enable the collective to preserve its politics while presenting a professional, non-threatening image. Unlike Riot Grrl zines (Kearny 2006) or politically alternative news media that “eschew a glossy, sophisticated look on both philosophical and practical grounds” (Linda Steiner 2004), Sister SF is as deeply committed to maintaining a polished, branded image typical of commercial/corporate culture as they are to the goals discussed above. The following section examines the details of the collective’s branding practices as they have been implemented both offline and on the Internet.

Strategic branding practices

Sister SF's website presents its DIY practices and goals within the frame of a glossy and professional website that is especially typical of corporate/commercial entities dedicated to branding their products or services. Computer technologies and increasingly common advanced web design skills have heightened the professional aesthetic of Sister SF and other DIY enterprises. In 2005, the site received over 35,000 hits per month and as of January 2007 sistersf.com was the first hit generated by a google search for "female DJ crew." Whereas at one time it was easy to distinguish a DIY zine from a glossy, mainstream print magazine, advanced web design tools and skills have blurred the lines between cottage industry and commercial productions.

Increasingly, scholars, marketing strategists and activists are discussing the role and importance of branding. Since the 1990s, a concern with how to operationalize and manage brands has been at the forefront of management studies (David A. Aaker 1991; Scott M. Davis 2002; Scott M. Davis, Michael Dunn, and David A. Aaker 2002; Jean-Noël Kapferer, 1997; John M. Murphy 1987) with an increasing focus regarding how to implement global branding strategies (Douglas B. Holt, John A. Quelch, and Earl L. Taylor 2004; Randall S. Rozin and Liz Magnusson 2003; April Wright 2002). Branding is generally discussed in academic and popular literature in relation to commercial culture and the powerful images adopted by corporations to market and sell their goods. This shift in emphasis from manufacturing goods to marketing them has been well documented but thus far, little attention has been paid to the impact that the "scaling-up of the logo's role" (Naomi Klein 1997, p. 28) is having on cultural production outside of the commercial environment in which it first flourished.

Given the excessive presence of advertising, logos, and branding in US popular culture, it is surprising that little consideration has been given to the potential effects that branding techniques can have when implemented by individuals, not-for-profits, (sub)cultural groups, or other collectives. The sheer pervasiveness of corporate marketing ensures that the general public—including members of Sister SF—are not only exposed to, but also buy into the value of advertising.

While the incentives for creating brand identification in corporate culture are obvious—higher product sales and profitability—there are parallel as well as divergent motives for other types of groups to establish brand identity. Thus, it should come as no surprise that collectives such as Sister SF are appropriating branding techniques to demarcate and, in a sense advertise, their presence in the public sphere.

From its first days as a collective, Sister SF has been committed to and believed in the importance of having a professional image complete with a consistent logo both offline and on the Web (Appendix B). Over the years, while new pages have been added to the website, the general layout, color scheme, and logo have remained consistent. The site's consistency is not surprising given that it was designed by Sister SF member and professional web designer XJS when the collective formed in 1997. XJS applied the practices of professionalism she learned as a corporate web designer to the Sister SF website. As someone with extensive experience design web pages for international corporations XJS is well aware of the value and return on long term branding initiatives.

As noted above, the website content encourages feminist practices such as resource sharing and community development; however, the color scheme of black, white, and yellow, along with its polished appearance enables it to blend in with

commercial DJ sites, most notably those for high profile dance clubs such as Crobar (www.crobar.com) and companies that sell DJ equipment such as Technics (www.panasonic-europe.com/technics), Stanton (www.stantonmagnetics.com/v2/index.asp), and the Technics1200s Service Center (www.1200s.com), which all favor black, white, and varying shades of grey as the basis for their color scheme. In her discussion of young girl distro⁵ owners Kearney (2006) argues that most of these website designers express femininity through the use of the color pink, although a few have chosen instead to use the color black to create “a serious or somber tone, and thus more masculine mood” (p. 282). Given the collective’s disavowal of feminism and the fact that most of the people who hire DJs for paid gigs—club managers and booking agents—are men, it is logical that Sister SF’s site also embodies a masculine aesthetic. These design choices create an overall look and feel that is compatible well with professional, commercial websites, such as those mentioned above.

Since the site’s inception, XJS has maintained ownership of the Sister SF website domain name (and the domain names of the Sister PDX and Sister NYC) and control of the design, implementation, and maintenance of the site to sustain a consistent brand and hence, image. The site is consistently updated as it continues to expand and in turn, generate ample web traffic. Visitors to the site can read about the upcoming gigs of residents, recent Sister SF top ten track lists, or join a listserv that distributes weekly updates on Sister SF’s events. For years, XJS alone managed the design and content information on the website. While she continues to be the site’s principal web designer, in recent years she has welcomed the help of Sister SF resident Samira, who is also a

professional web designer. Both women believe that the site's branded and professional image has been instrumental to the group's success. In Samira's words:

The site design and updates are best left in the hands of a few individuals. There's a recognizable look and feel to the crew and the branding and [Annie's] consistency and her drive to make things polished and really uniform looking and consistent has been very integral to our success. You know, it's stuff that we talk about and it's stuff that will sometimes come up 'cause more people want to have input on what the site looks like and how we present ourselves and at the same time there's some real value there where you have, you look at the Sister logo and you just know. You look at the Sister site and it's been the same and people can expect that. It's a really important part of our identity (personal interview, May 2005).

By far, the site's most memorable feature is the Sister logo which is prominently displayed in the top left corner of the site at all times. It reads, "Sister: women DJs and MCs in San Francisco and beyond" (Appendix B). The logo also appears in banner form at Sister SF events. The image portion of the logo consists of a slender, woman's hand, working what appears to be an industry standard Technics turntable. The circular framing of the hand on the turntable and the absence of women's bodies in the design keeps the focus on the act of DJing as opposed to the women who comprise the group.

Additional practices have been put in place to help ensure a consistent identity. Sister SF residents claim that XJS is not only Sister SF's main web designer, but also the matriarch of the collective offline and ultimately the one who is "holding the ship together" (Samira, personal interview, May 2005). For example, XJS is very particular

about the events at which the Sister SF banner/logo can be displayed. If members are DJing at an event that is not officially endorsed or produced by the collective then the event and event holder's politics are discussed at a group meeting where a decision is made regarding whether or not the banner should be displayed.

Sister beyond San Francisco

Despite the fact that the collective is very protective of its identity—a key elements of corporate branding—no steps have been taken to trademark the use of Sister in an E/DM context. The collective is dedicated to expanding the presence of Sister SF and women DJs across the US but they are particular about the terms and conditions under which it happens. Over the years, Sister SF has received an extensive amount of emails from women across the country wishing to start their own chapter of Sister after learning about the collective online. As a result, the collective has had to develop practices to maintain their branded identity. According to XJS:

We've [Sister SF] also had discussions with other crews. Should we have random strangers using our name? Because we don't have a registered company, we don't have officialness. So it's always on the edge. We can prove use of the name and ownership of the logo but that doesn't mean a lot...so we've restricted it to people that we know (personal interview, May 2005).

Thus, while Sister SF promotes the visibility of women DJs, the collective is very particular about who can endorse the Sister name. It is not enough to be a woman DJ or have a group of interested women in any one geographical location; rather, potential chapters must have or establish face-to-face connection with Sister SF which members believe is integral to ensuring that the purpose, politics, and mission statements of new

chapters follow those outlined by the original group. In 2002, the group expanded its presence to New York City and Portland. The migration of a handful of female DJs from San Francisco to New York City led to the formation Sister NYC and once members of Sister SF became aware of female DJ activity in Portland they held face-to-face meetings to approve the official establishment of Sister PDX.

To further protect its branded identity, Sister SF has chosen to maintain control over all chapters of Sister in cyberspace. According to XJS, the rationale is that the ability to monitor and control the sites can help guarantee “ultimate control” and that “the look and feel and philosophy are similar” (personal interview, July 2003). In order to be able to control the sites, Sister SF has chosen to own the domain names of all Sister chapters and enforce the use of site templates that adhere to specific aesthetics that mirror those of the original Sister SF website. Such practices reflect the importance the group places on maintaining control over the specific image and politics of additional Sister chapters as they are launched. Overall, Sister SF uses hierarchical strategies and consistent branding typical of corporate/commercial culture to manage its expanding Sister USA network. These practices which diverge from the group’s altruistic actions and goals exist in tandem with the collective’s community building practices.

Conclusion

The efforts of collectives like Sister SF are starting to make possible events like the one described in the introduction to this essay. In many respects Sister SF’s dedication to building and cultivating an alternative space for women DJs both online and offline reflects characteristics of feminist and DIY collectives. Despite Sister SF’s

aversion to the word “feminism,” the collective’s actions are representative of liberal feminism’s goal of equality between the sexes. According to organizational communication scholars (Paula Yancey Martin 1990), there is no consensus regarding what qualities constitute an organization as feminist. Liberal feminists in particular do not consider hierarchical structures—like the ones Sister SF has in place—to be necessarily anti-feminist (Marx Ferree 1988; cited in Patricia Yancey Martin, 1990). The group values non-competitive and inclusive altruistic practices such as sharing DJ resources and providing networking opportunities for women DJs. Specific branding and management strategies are in place to ensure consistency and a high degree of professionalism. They are also the collective’s means to maintaining control over Sister SF’s image and politics, especially as new chapters are added to its network.

The collective is an insightful case study because of the corporate/commercial practices it embraces and implements to further feminist goals. Rarely do women-centered cottage industries and music communities employ branding strategies and a system of centralized, hierarchical control. This study suggests that these practices can be successfully implemented to promote a liberal feminist agenda and move women from the margins to the center of spaces in which they historically have had little power.

Since 1996, Sister SF has worked to heighten the visibility and power of women E/DM DJs. In their own words, they put forth their efforts in order to “build up other woman DJs” and promote “a gender instead of a genre.” The Internet and World Wide Web are vital tools that Sister SF depends on promote and develop the growth of women-centered DJ community. The creation of new media sites and networks is typical of both DIY culture and contemporary feminism. By creating its own media sites (both online

and offline) Sister SF resists mainstream media discourses that position women in passive, marginalized roles in male dominated spaces. Even more importantly, the collective's practices exemplify feminist cultural politics in action. By breaking down the barriers between consumers of E/DM (such as record collectors, club dancers and fans) and producers (of DJ sets, E/DM events, cultural knowledge, and websites) the collective democratizes cultural production, which Marian Bredin (1991) argues is vital to the affirmation of the marginal experiences of women everywhere. Sister SF's merging of DIY goals and corporate/commercial practices reflect a strength in collective action reminiscent of Mitchell's (2000b) findings concerning women's radio. Overall, the efforts of the Sister USA network as a whole demonstrate a nationwide commitment to improving the position of women not only in E/DM, but also other male dominated communities beyond the dance floor.

¹ In DJ culture, the term resident is used to refer to a DJ who has ties to a specific DJ collective or regularly performs at a specific location.

² The drop from 10 members to nine was the result of Annie Shaw's (known in the DJ community as XJS) decision to end her participation in Sister SF as a DJ but to remain a part of the collective in an advisory role.

³ Generally, the role of the MC in E/DM culture is to rhyme or sing while the DJ plays the music.

⁴ Male DJs are only invited to participate in Sister SF's annual event called "Dragnet—We Like Boys" at which they must perform in drag. 2006 marked the ninth annual Dragnet event (www.sistersf.com).

⁵ In this context the term “distros” refers to independent online distribution services that specialize in selling girl-made zines.

Appendix A

Semi-structured Interview Guide

- How do you define technology?
- Did you have experience with technology before getting involved in E/DM?
- What is your musical background?
- What was your first introduction to electronic/dance music?
- What roles do technology and electronic/dance music have in your life?
- Do you produce music and/or DJ?
- Why did you decide to starting producing/DJing?
- Do you find that the greater electronic/dance community in your area is supportive of your work?
- Have people helped you along the way? Who? How?
- Who is supportive of your music? To what extent?
- How would you define your support system?
- What kinds of personal contacts are relevant and in what ways?
- What are some of the barriers to success you've experienced?
- How important is the Internet to your work?

Appendix B



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