

Feeling Through the Keen and Grind: Team Dresch's Personal Best

Gretchen Jude

Blog post published November 7, 2016 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/ezmhp-0bx66>

Abstract

Image of Alice Bag used with her permission (thank you!) *"Genres, styles form around places of cohesion, of transport, of passage. Not an instrumental mathematics (though it can be that too), but a speculative one that seeks out locations of collective affect, of resonance between micro and macro spheres."* –Marcus Boon, "One Nation Under a Groove" Yes.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Fandom/Fan Studies, Gender, Identity, Listening



Recommended citation

Jude, G. (2016, November 7). Feeling Through the Keen and Grind: Team Dresch's Personal Best. *Sounding Out!*. <https://doi.org/10.59350/ezmhp-0bx66>

Copyright

Copyright © Gretchen Jude 2016. Distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



*Image of Alice Bag used
with her permission
(thank you!)*

“Genres, styles form around places of cohesion, of transport, of passage. Not an instrumental mathematics (though it can be that too), but a speculative one that seeks out locations of collective affect, of resonance between micro and macro spheres.” –Marcus Boon, [“One Nation Under a Groove”](#)

Yes. Punk, is a way of living, being, thinking, and relating to the world. Yes, it is bigger than borders. . .greater than the sum of than any number of bands or even the label of “musical genre” altogether. Its dynamic style visually signifies; its DIY mode-of-operations can empower, even as its more capitalist-oriented versions can frustrate and exploit.

YES YES YES.

But also, **NO!**

Punk sounds!



<https://youtu.be/9dMVHxFzNK4>

Even if punk's sound intentionally evades classification and clichéd high-fidelity top-ten lists like Keanu Reeves dodges bullets in the *Matrix*, it nonetheless exists. and means. and incites. and motivates. and creates powerful structures of feeling that resonate through entire lifetimes, reverberations of that one all-ages basement show.

How do we know? Because, at the absolute very least, both of us have heard it with—and *through*—our bodies. It has moved us, and not just symbolically, intellectually, politically, and metaphorically. It has quite literally vibrationally, kinesthetically, heart-throbbingly, finger bleedingly, head-bangingly, body-smashing-up-against-others-bodily, in the pit of our stomachs-y, angry tear cryingly, skin tinglingly **moved us**.



<https://youtu.be/CXCvuxcoc4s>

<https://youtu.be/4C8JLaSCJWQ>

Without universalizing our respective experiences in the [Jersey](#) and [Inland Empire/SoCal](#) punk scenes of the 1990s/early 2000s—and our wide listenings and local involvements since then—we want to say simply that punk sound is not an abstract and negative entity. Punk sounds—and [punk'd sounds](#)—form distinct sonic calls to some of us out there in the world that our bodies yearn to answer.

And its listeners' understanding of and relationship to punk's sound(s) matters. In her essay "[On Not Playing Dead](#)," Bikini Kill, Le Tigre, and (the) Julie Ruin lead singer [Kathleen Hanna](#) described one of the key powers of punk's live sound as creating a threshold of physical exchange, a vibration drawing folks into "one of the only spaces where we give and receive pleasure publicly" to friends and strangers alike, which she argues "seems radical for a myriad of reasons, especially because it challenges the idea that sexuality/pleasure is only for people in straight/monogamous relationships and not something we as a community can have through music." Punk sound constructs, enables, and sometimes downright demands a variety of participatory responses, both individual and social.



https://youtu.be/_iiOsdSaSW4

In short, just ask a punk about what punk sounds like! They know! And they will tell you about it! It's up to us to figure out how to listen. And what better space to try in the audiovisual 'zine that is *Sounding Out!*, started by folks whose scenes taught them how to forge and sustain community with and through sound.

This series (and its follow up in Spring 2017) calls bullshit on the related notions that punk sound is either simple presence—ye olde “three chords,” a misnomer that is always already more geographically and historically specific than popular discourse allows—or overdetermined absence, a too-open, too-inclusive sound that, to riff on Green Day, is simultaneously “nothing and everything all at once.” And we very deliberately use “sound” rather than “music” as our guiding framework to think through punk's sonic pull, not because punk “isn't music” (a stale but ever present dis on the genre), but because punk itself sounds out the limitations of musical study (in addition to Alice Bag's musical manifesto below, see Leandro Donozo's “[MANIFIESTO POR UNA MUSICOLOGÍA PUNK](#)” suggested to us by Alejandro Madrid).

<https://youtu.be/bLrR9A4MoLU>

Our Punk Sound series implicitly argues that sound studies methodologies are better suited to understanding how punk works sonically than existing journalistic and academic conversations about musical genre, chord progressions, and/or genealogies of bands. Alexandra Vasquez's sound-oriented work on Cuban music, for example, in *Listening in Detail* (2014) opens up necessary conversations about the “flashes, moments, sounds” in music that bear its meanings and its colonial, raced, classed, and gendered histories in material ways people can hear and feel. While retaining the specificity of Vasquez's argument and the specific sonic archive bringing it forth, we too insist on “an ethical and intellectual obligation to the question: what do the musicians *sound like*” (12) and how do folks identifying with and through these musical sounds hear them?

In this series, we invite you to amplify varied historicized “details” of punk sound—its chunk-chunk-chunk skapunk riffs, screams, growls, group chants, driving rhythms, honking saxophones—

hearing/feeling/touching these sounds in richly varied locations, times, places, and perspectives: as a pulsing bead of condensation dripping down the wall of **The Smell in Downtown LA (#savethesnell)**, a drummer making her own time on tour, a drunk sitting too near the amp at a backyard party, a queer teenager in their bedroom being yelled at to “turn it down” and “act like a lady[or a man]”. . .and on and on. Today’s essay is by Gretchen Jude. Listen along as she reflects on growing up through listening to Team Dresch’s *Personal Best*. And keep coming back every Monday in November for more!

SOUND!

NO, SOUND!

–Aaron Sounding Out! + Jenny Sounding Out!

—



Photo of the back of Team Dresch’s Personal Best album, used with permission by the author.

In the spirit of Critical Karaoke, first introduced by [Joshua Clover](#) at the [Experience Music Project annual Pop Conference](#), this piece was written to be read with the album playing alongside. In anchoring my text/your reading so directly/literally in the sound, I hope those who have not had first-hand experience of growing up queer can understand on a more visceral level how I have

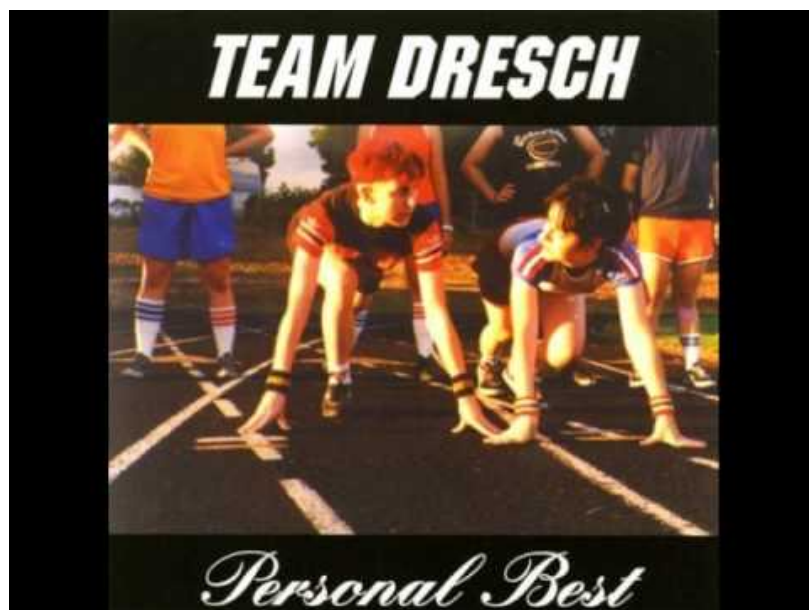
heard/felt/lived through this music. Sounds work on bodies in non-verbal ways, so the sharing of these queer(ing) vibrations may allow fans to sense an underlying queerness in all punk sound.

Released in January 1995, *Personal Best*, the first album from Pacific Northwest quartet Team Dresch, rode the crest of the Queercore wave, itself propelled by decades of feminist, gay rights, and AIDS activism. The lesbian-identified band—Donna Dresch (guitar and bass), Jody Bleyle (guitar, bass, and vocals), Kaia Wilson (guitar and vocals) and Marci Martinez (drums)—was also fueled by the punk energy and DIY ethos that flared back to life with the Seattle grunge scene and Riot Grrrl movement.

The quartet's technical skill showed their commitment to music; Dresch (who also produced the album) and Bleyle co-released the band's debut on their respective labels, Chainsaw and Candy Ass Records. At the same time, the group's cohesiveness and cooperation was evidenced in the complexity of their compositional strategies: self-produced albums, multiple time changes, shifts between guitar effects. *Personal Best* managed to rage without outward aggression. The band seemed to feel, like me, an anger that was full of anguish, a pointed fury at the causes of their anguish—yet leavened with humor ('I spent the last ten days of my life ripping off the Smiths').

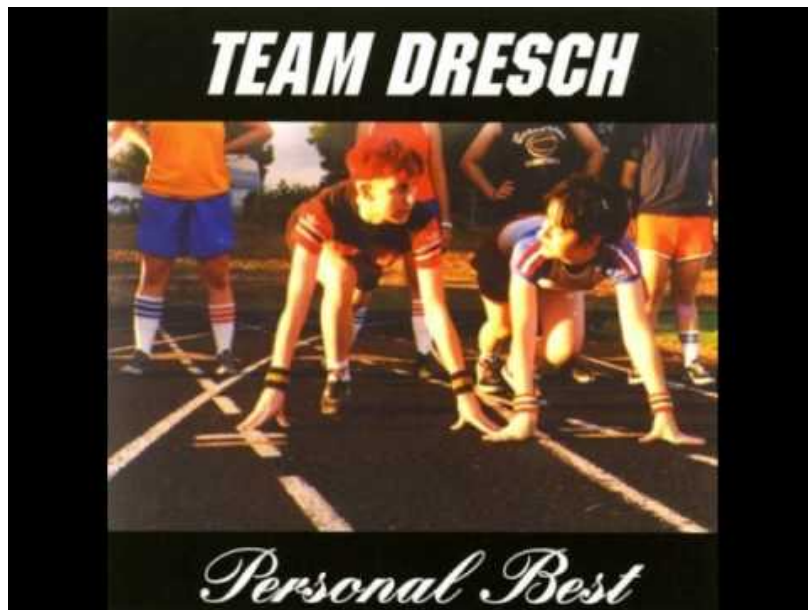
The following is a critical listening of *Personal Best*.

(Side 1)



<https://youtu.be/KPALFX9QPQ0>

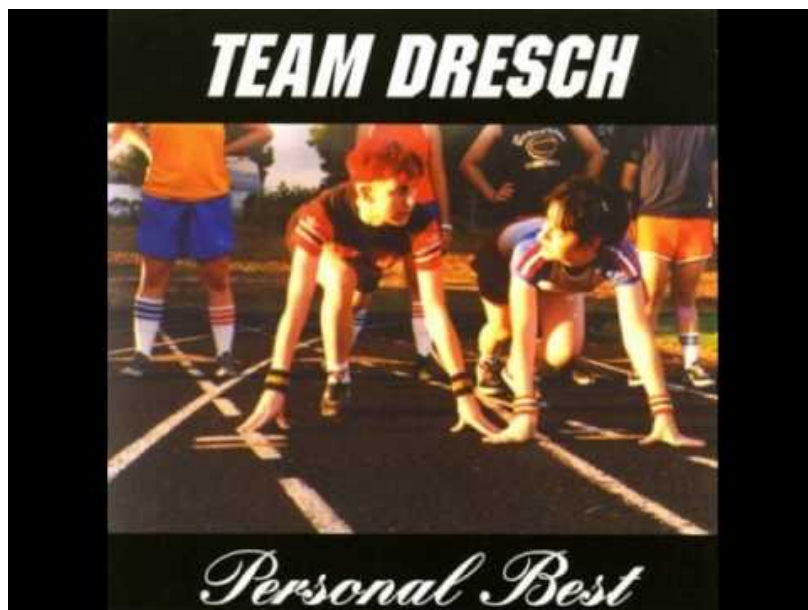
Something still remains in my body from the very first time I heard this album. The audaciously-titled “Fagetarian and Dyke” goes off like an alarm, with insistent guitar string strikes that ring in my ears and run down my spine with a shock. Once the drums come in, I am already swaying in time as the vocalist demands a breathless ‘how’ before rapidly morphing into a long-held growl —‘searching for you’. It was the music I had long needed without knowing.



https://youtu.be/6WGzM_i2cWQ

The second song starts spare to the point of hesitance, a thin bassline with ominous guitar jangles and a backbeat promising a break in the intensity—until the band coalesces around Wilson’s rhythmic chant bristling with articulate screams. But contrary to the title—“Hate the Christian Right—I hear less hate than angry frustration. Bleyle’s vocals take the fore with melancholic power, making explicit the fundamental feeling, ‘the fear, fear I’m sick with it.’ The sound is dense and close, mixed with no reverb so I feel like I’m deep inside the music, sweating with the band. My hand moves with a will of its own toward the volume control, I crank it to feel the kick beating inside my chest like another heart, I can’t stop moving my feet, my legs, I am impelled to motion.

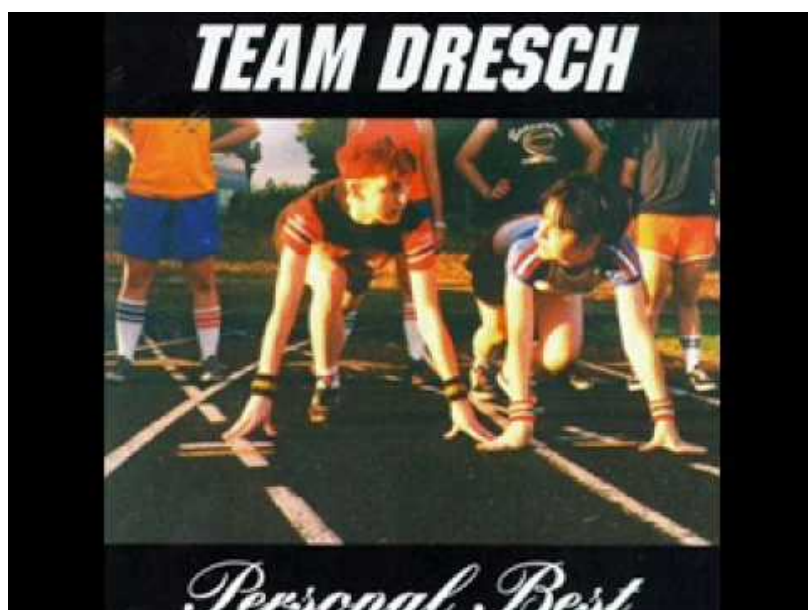
Looking back twenty-one years at this musical moment, it’s hard to fathom how much society has changed—in terms of both the structures of musical production/distribution and our understandings of gender/sexual identity. Yet when I encounter these songs once again, my listening remains fully present. How is it that this album still works to electrify me even today? Pressing play now, I hear this album through the patina of nostalgia. Even calling it an ‘album’ evokes another time, conjuring the act of flipping through stiff pages of family photos. There are tactile similarities—I slide the vinyl disc from its paper sleeve, grasp the edges of the cardboard dust jacket, leisurely run my eyes over the hand-scrawled track listing. I regard the cover image and recall my pleasurable smirk at the in-joke. But even back in 1995, when I listened on cassette and CD Walkman, I wanted to take this album with me everywhere.



<https://youtu.be/iRiztpLQfOc>

Jangly guitar riffs, popping tom hits and Wilson's clear soprano in multi-tracked harmony give "She's Crushing My Mind" a jaunty opening. But the tension amps up with feedback on 'she was born this way,' and Wilson punches the verse: 'she wants to (forget it)'. The song ends abruptly, no resolution, reflecting the unrequited queer love the lyrics express.

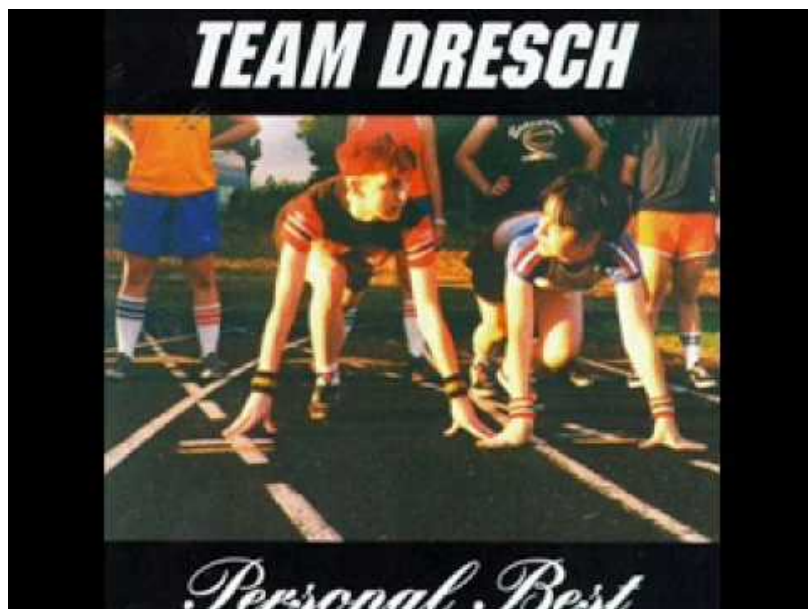
Even the words I use to describe the world have changed since 1995. I came out in 1986, before the word 'queer' was wrested from the verbal fists of homophobes. In retrospect, it was a brief moment, after feminism came out as lesbian, but before the 'lesbian body' was deprived of its 'radical' prefix—a time when it made sense to call lesbians 'avengers' or even 'amazons' (always in the plural). By 2016, having come out so many times in so many ways, I am no longer sure what others hear when they regard me pronouncing myself 'queer'. And yet then as now, the energy I feel in this music goes beyond representation. The sound moves me with what [Julian Henriques](#) terms an "energetic patterning of vibrations" (76), setting in motion a sort of sympathetic resonance that shakes off labels and identity categories.



https://youtu.be/UgW_ThVAoD4

Just as I wonder when the darkness will end, “Freewheel” gallops in, cavalier, and drags me into the afternoon grass for some silliness. Wilson and Bleyle’s sweetly ironic harmony on ‘you can go back to your boyfriend’ sidelines ‘that girl,’ instead placing camaraderie front and center.

Nowadays, like most, I listen digitally, soft noise-reduction earbuds squished into my ears. Through my headphones, the violence of the 21st century bleeding light-speed across my mediated vision makes the sheer vulnerability underlying Team Dresch’s mad sounds even more striking. As a teen, I avoided mosh pits. Bony boy-elbows shot out at exactly the height of my eye sockets, and even combat boots weren’t enough protection from the public risk of my female body. At home or with friends, I sometimes reveled in the nihilism voiced by male punk bands. But the performance of an all-inclusive anger blindly striking out at society-at-large (which often seemed to involve getting drunk and fighting) mostly felt intimidating to me. Team Dresch retuned the timbre of punk rage—from frustration with authority-as-abstraction to lamentation over first-hand experience of oppression—then directed that incisive anger toward fundamentally feminist self-protection and catharsis.



<https://youtu.be/dOyS6PA2qWM>

The sincerity and solemnity of the riff that opens “She’s Amazing” bloom into a punk ballad that resonates with my best experiences of friendship. Wilson and Bleyle alternate and harmonize in tribute to female wisdom and strength. Even as the vocalists acknowledge their deep self-doubt and insecurity, the decisive instrumentals bolster them up.

It’s not that I didn’t feel angry. It’s that angry men sounded scary.

In a moment of stillness, I hear echoes of [Patti Smith’s amazing\(ly bent\) cover of Van Morrison’s “Gloria”](#) (1976). Smith’s fearless androgyny, her working-class snarl, her performance of desire for a woman exhilarate even today. Another old favorite rings in my ears: The Slits, playing as outlaws-on-the-lam. [Underclass anthem “Shoplifting”](#) (1979) double-dared me to flaunt needless authority, as Ari Up’s breathy vocals accelerate to an almost feline scream—‘run!’—and jangling guitars veer

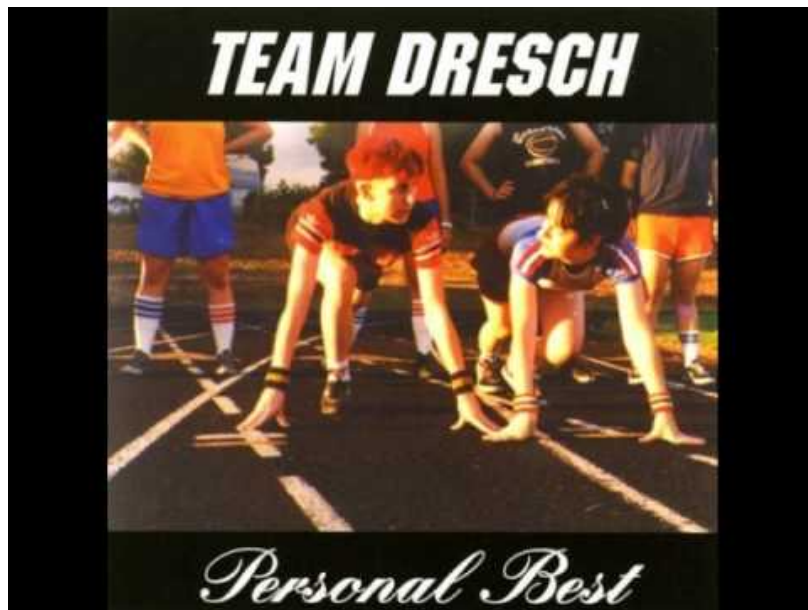
chromatic. I adored The Slits for their fearless extroversion—audacious yet always girly. I am ready, hungry for more.

(RECORD FLIP INTERLUDE)



In one of my '90s journals, I imagined [Jody Bleyle](#), Team Dresch vocalist who sang, "I'd trade the pennies to grow wings and eight more eyes."

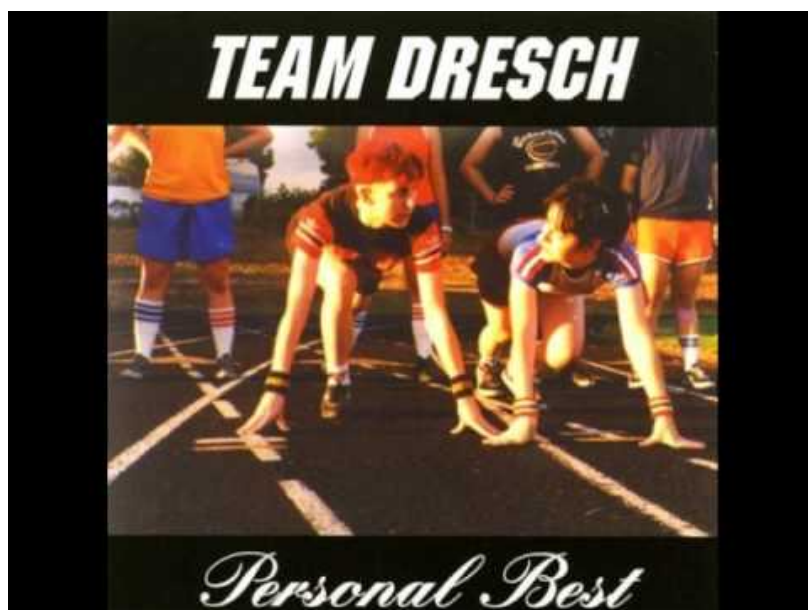
(Side 2)



<https://youtu.be/U4uQ0Xo4GOW>

“Fake Fight” opens punchy, with space in the bass and insistent hi-hat. Bleye’s reedy tomboy alto alternately croons low and close into the mic (as if directly into my ear), then shouts along with synched noise pedal interludes: ‘I can see a brave tomorrow, don’t let this spaceship bring me down’.

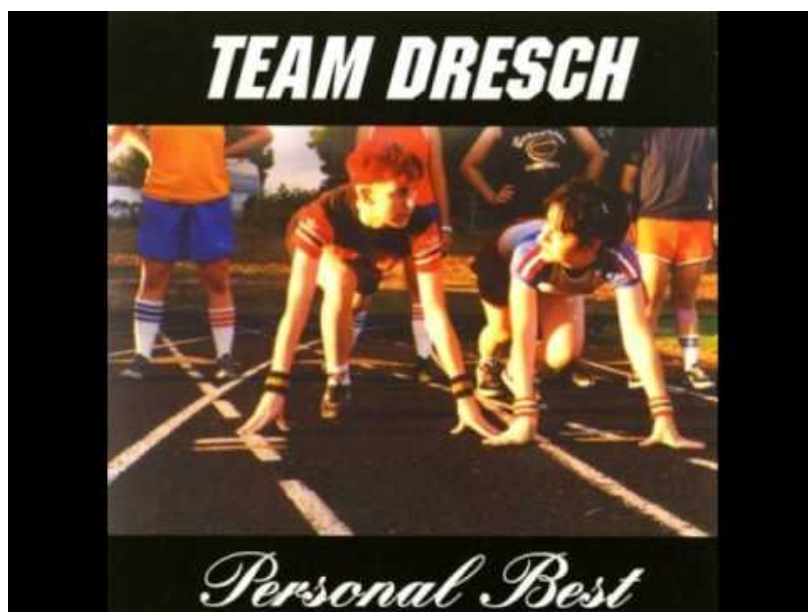
Yvon Bonenfant describes the practice of queer listening—of listening as deeply feeling—as an attempt to recuperate queerness as community: “Queer listening listens out for, reaches toward, the disoriented or differently oriented other. So far, there are no majority queer cultures. Queer is always listening out through the static produced by not-queer emanations of vocalic bodies. Queer can like, love and enjoy those bodies in every way, but still needs to twist around and negotiate through them to find other queer” (78). For years I did this by instinct, paying attention to any hint of coded lesbian tendencies. In the pre-*Ellen* world, this was a survival technique.



<https://youtu.be/5cDpWAg22Ks>

Quirky “#1 Chance Pirate TV” shifts into high gear with 4/4 drumsticks and a vigorous punch on the toms. The song (a tribute to Sinead O’Connor) then suddenly slows into restful repetitions; ‘Sometimes it feels all right,’ Bleyle intones again and again—in a kind of mantra for getting through all the times when it doesn’t.

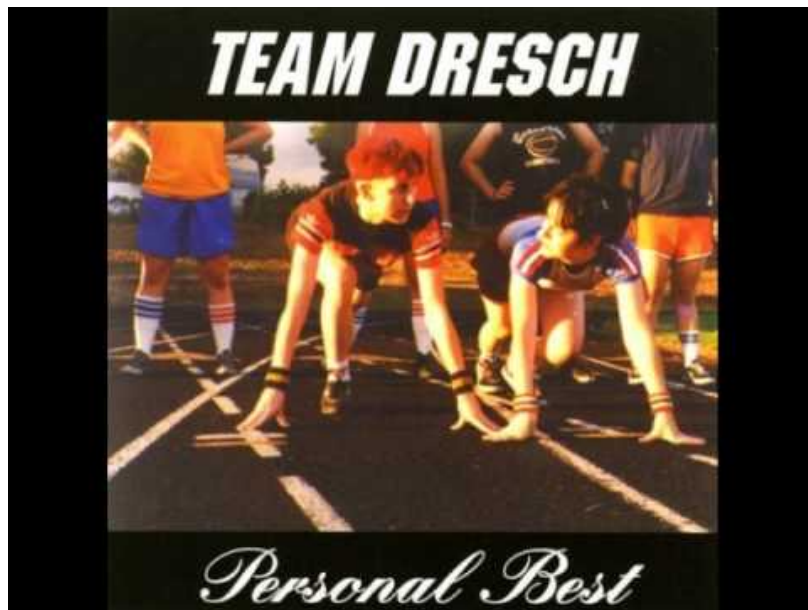
By the time I heard *Personal Best*, I had all but given up listening for my own bodily experiences—in the specifics of its love, anger, desire, suffering—offered back to me in music. Sure there were decades of lesbian folk music (yawn). But with Team Dresch, I didn’t need to engage in recuperative queer listening—this was unapologetically queer sounding. I was bowled over with this feeling—when you can give yourself over to the music because the people making the sounds know exactly what you’ve gone through, what you are living through. The reality you know by heart but have never heard affirmed in the voices around you.



https://youtu.be/CsFm_LhZQHw

“D.A. Don’t Care” rocks like a regal lullaby, but on a theme so heavy it presses my heart to diamond. Wilson’s caustic deployment of the cliché ‘and how was he supposed to know’ subverts the always-overdone ‘her word against his.’ From here the band rushes the album to its apotheosis, as Bleyle proclaims her own physical autonomy in the wake of abuse: ‘I know what to do with this body.’ The following verse leaves behind the dry vocal mix of the rest of the album, as the haunting image of a ‘polyester basketball uniform’ is buried deep in heavy bass, chilling with reverb.

In the hard-earned, bittersweet privilege of reaching my middle-age, I still shiver at Beyle’s chorus—not for myself now, but on behalf of those now young: the trans and genderqueer kids, an upcoming generation of dykes and fags—the ones mistreated, raised to have their own bodies and hearts turned against themselves. I want them to find music that catalyzes the scream: ‘I KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THIS BODY.’



<https://youtu.be/FPh609HPrHw>

Barely time to breathe and then the grinding lead-in to “Growing Up in Springfield,” a confessional of rejection and isolation in small-town America. Unlike Wilson’s, my mother didn’t ‘cry when I shaved my head.’ Nevertheless, the biting affirmation, ‘Those were the worst years of my life,’ rings satisfyingly through a burst of white noise.

With *Personal Best*, Team Dresch generates a synergy of sound and affect that engages me beyond nostalgia. The band weaves together multiple elements—voices with instruments, tempo and pedal shifts, the trajectory of song order, and lyrics that express the fallout of a queer girlhood in the rural Northwest isolation—to transform fear and self-hatred into courageous resistance. This synergy reflects (to paraphrase Adrienne Rich) **a visionary, cleansing anger** that dares me to feel new possibilities, both personal and political. Guitars chorus, drums pop sharp and clear, and vocals lie low but clear in the mix, embedded in a basement mix of mourning and menace. The keening rage in this album lances like a healing needle.

<https://youtu.be/kZVY0jsBEGs>

The lo-fi opening lines of “Screwing Yer Courage” break into Bleyle’s full-on howl. The heavy cacophony of the band feels like body-surfing like a 10-foot wave of sound. Even as she voices the desire to ‘move to the woods,’ the band’s sound performs a sense of community. The album ends with a tornado of noise, a storm that spins at exactly the right speed for me to join in. Softly, then more insistently Bleyle murmurs then cries: ‘I love you, baby, I love you.’ With one final delicious guitar arpeggio, slowly drawn out, the album is...

The music itself, the specificity of its vibrations, is of the essence. Attending to the experiential conditions of our listening is equally fundamental, and through articulating both sounds and contexts we may move past merely gesturing towards taste and invoking genre as shorthand for what we already value. As [Nina Eidsheim](#) describes, “in encounters through and with music, we are physically touched and we tangibly touch others” (183). In the case of punk and its queer progeny, we vibrate together in and with a visceral noise that harmonizes through its very dissonance.

Cover image is of crowd surfing at a 2006 Team Dresch reunion show by Flickr User Frances, Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 Generic ([CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)).

Gretchen Jude is a PhD candidate in Performance Studies at the University of California Davis and a performing artist/composer based in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her doctoral research explores the intersections of voice and electronics in transcultural performance contexts, delving into such topics as presence and embodiment in computer music, language and cultural difference in vocal genres, and collaborative electroacoustic improvisation. Interaction with her immediate environment forms the core of Gretchen's musical practice. Gretchen has been studying Japanese music since 2001 and holds multiple certifications in kotoperformance from the Sawai Koto Institute in Tokyo, as well as an MFA in Electronic Music and Recording Media from Mills College in Oakland, California. In the spring of 2015, a generous grant from the Pacific Rim Research Program supported Gretchen's intensive study of hauta and jiuta singing styles in Tokyo. This podcast (as well as a chapter of her dissertation) are direct results of that support. Infinite thanks also to the gracious and generous assistance of Shibahime-sensei, Mako-chan and my many other friends and teachers in Japan.



REWIND! . . . If you liked this post, you may also dig:

Sounding Out! Podcast #50: Yoshiwara Soundwalk: Taking the Underground to the Floating World – Gretchen Jude

SO! Amplifies: Indie Preserves – Norie Guthrie and Scott Carlson

Sounding Out! Podcast #55: New Brunswick Music Scene Symposium – Frank Bridges

This is Your Body on the Velvet Underground–Jacob Smith

Live Through This: Sonic Affect, Queerness, and the Trembling Body–Airek Beauchamp

Garageland! Authenticity and Musical Taste–Aaron Trammell

Sounding Out! Podcast #28: Off the 60: A Mix-Tape Dedication to Los Angeles–Jennifer Stoeber