

**But You Look So Pretty When You Smile:
20th Century Hysteria and its Legacy in “Sad Girl Indie”**

by

Johanna Sommer

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In 1933 Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary: “I will not be ‘famous,’ ‘great.’ I will go on adventuring, changing, opening my mind and my eyes, refusing to be stamped and stereotyped. The thing is to free one's self: to let it find its dimensions, not be impeded.”

In 2021, indie rock singer-songwriter Lucy Dacus tweeted: “Sadness can be meaningful but I got a bone to pick with the ‘sad girl indie’ genre, not the music that gets labeled as that, but the classification and commodification and perpetual expectation of women’s pain, also I don’t think my songs are sad, anyways good morning”

Nearly a century is removed between these two texts, and yet, a similar problem remains: a voiced frustration by women artists against categorization. Woolf speaks as a woman struggling as a minority in her profession, which some of her most famous works would aim to expose, as well as having been diagnosed with hysteria, a blanket term used to explain her mental illness. Dacus is speaking as a member of a boom in female singer-songwriters seen in the last decade, which has regressively been deemed “sad girl indie” music. These two women represent, either through subject matter or illness, the ways emotional expression can become an all-consuming marketed trait over a typically marginalized artist’s persona, causing them to be defined by their suffering, and in turn giving new cause for its renewal. Many factors of their lives differ, but a reductive language in describing them remains.

A Brief History of Hysteria

Dating back to around 1900 BCE in Ancient Egypt, doctors and philosophers have held differing beliefs about the nature of hysteria, though the term has always singularly applied to people with uteruses. In Ancient Greece, the “wandering womb” theory was widely accepted, and claimed the uterus roamed the body and caused excessive emotion, and male semen was believed to have healing properties. As late as 1880, French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot first took a modern scientific look at hysteria, which a student of his, Sigmund Freud, developed further in the subsequent decades.

Generally recognized in hysteria were its symptoms, which included emotional outbursts, histrionic behavior, anxiety, insomnia and paralysis, among other qualities that men found challenging. Common treatments included childbirth, regular marital sex, pregnancy, orgasms and Silas Weir Mitchell’s rest cure.

In “Mad, Bad, and Sad,” Lisa Appignanesi writes, “[Hysteria] described a sexualized madness full of contradictions, one which could play all feminine parts and take on a dizzying variety of symptoms, though none of them had any real, detectable base in the body.” (126) Many of those diagnosed with hysteria during the 19th and early 20th centuries were women who felt at odds with their social surroundings, whether due to their ambition, sexuality, lack of autonomy, or general inability to be heard.

“During an era when patriarchal culture felt itself to be under attack by its rebellious daughters, one obvious defense was to label women campaigning for access to universities, the professions, and the vote as mentally disturbed, and of all the nervous disorders of the fin de siècle, hysteria was the most strongly identified with the feminist movement,” writes Elaine Showalter in “The Female Malady.” “First of all, doctors had noticed that hysteria was apt to appear in young women who were especially rebellious... [neurologist Horatio Bryan] Donkin too had seen among his patients a high percentage of unconventional women- artists and writers.” (145)

Two such writers who suffered from the malady Showalter describes were Virginia Woolf and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, both of whom successfully worked to expose and confront gender disparities through their writing. The work of these authors, including Woolf’s nonfiction texts “A Room of One’s Own” and “Moments of Being,” as well as Perkins Gilman’s autofiction “The Yellow Wallpaper,” display their frustrations with patriarchal society. Perhaps it is no surprise to learn they were not effectively treated by their male doctors.

With advancements in Western technology and medicine in the 20th century, anxiety and depression diagnoses began to replace the hysteria diagnosis, alongside wartime-related pain.

“All of this just continued until the end of World War II, when they finally realized that there was something men were suffering, which was very similar, and then they finally called it PTSD,” said Guara Narayan, a professor of literature at Purchase College, SUNY, referring to post traumatic stress disorder. “Then it was no longer women-associated, and now it has disappeared, although of course we have the whole sort of normalizing of depression, anxiety, and bipolarity.”

While the hysteria diagnosis is no longer medically acknowledged, taken out of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1980, the same phenomena continue to materialize under different names. The extremity of the consequences may have been lessened, but the misnomer of “hysteria” has found a home in many avenues of contemporary culture, notably in the “sad girl indie” trend of the 21st century.

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Woolf, Gilman, and the Women Left Behind

Perhaps one of the most useful texts on hysteria during the late 19th century is Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Based on her own experiences, “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a novella that traces a woman’s descent into madness after the birth of her baby. Gilman was diagnosed with hysteria and treated via the rest cure, invented by her doctor Mitchell, which demands an abstinence from physical or intellectual activity, including writing.

The prohibition of writing causes a lot of turmoil for Gilman’s protagonist, and she starts to journal in secrecy, which becomes the manuscript of “The Yellow Wallpaper.” She is not only barred from doing basic, beneficial activities, but is constantly under close watch by her husband

John, who of course, is also a doctor. Gilman writes, “John does not know how much I really suffer. He knows there is no *reason* to suffer, and that satisfies him,” (14) and “I don’t know why I should write this. And I know John would think it absurd. But I must say what I think and feel in some way- it is such a relief!” (21)

John is not purposely villainous, but his role as a doctor blinds him to the desperate needs of his wife as a human being, making him unable to help her in ways that don’t just deter her pain, but heal it. By the end of the text, the speaker has become taken over by her delusions of women living in her room’s gaudy yellow wallpaper and begins to creep around like an animal, causing her husband to faint when he sees her.

“At the end of ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’ is the diagnosis a liberating one, or is she now incarcerated in madness,” asks Narayan. “Is it a good thing that she tore all the paper off and at the end of the scene is crawling, she calls it ‘creeping,’ ...and then, the husband faints, the biggest surprise of all, and she creeps right over him. It’s a horrifying image... but at the same time it has allowed her to opt out of the narrative of marriage and motherhood, which is also a very constraining narrative.”

One thing that Gilman’s speaker is afforded in her treatment is a room of her own, something that Woolf thinks is necessary for a woman’s intellectual success, which she outlines in her 1929 extended essay of the same name.

“A forerunner of the argument that she makes in ‘A Room of One’s Own,’ is that in order to be creative, you need to have time, space, [money] and privacy, and illness is the only way in which women are guaranteed that,” said Peter Fifield, author of “Modernism and Physical Illness.”

Woolf, like Gilman, was diagnosed with hysteria, though Gilman was presumably suffering from severe postpartum depression; contemporary scholars now surmise Woolf as having suffered from what is now diagnosed as bipolar disorder. As she writes about in her memoir, Woolf was plagued by continuous sexual abuse by her half-siblings in her youth and by the death of her mother at age 13, as well as the pain and exhaustion of many bouts of influenza for over a decade.

The reality is that this illness does not fit nicely into a second-wave feminist box, one which attempts to dismiss the hysteria diagnosis as purely oppressive, when in actuality it was granted due to the real anguish she was suffering. She was at the mercy of male doctors who failed to treat her effectively. Like Gilman, Woolf underwent rest cure treatment, but unlike her, Woolf, after many failed suicide attempts, eventually ended her life at age 59 when she walked into the River Ouse, her pockets weighed with rocks.

“[There is an] antipsychiatry gesture of saying, ‘But this [diagnosis] is just a way in which women are marginalized and oppressed,’” Fifield said over a video interview. “You think, ‘Well it is certainly one of the ways women are marginalized and oppressed,’ but Woolf is also incredibly ill for long periods, and what to do with that? It’s kind of an uncomfortable truth that somebody can be ill and still sort of squashed, controlled and oppressed by the prevailing medical authority.”

Neither Woolf nor Gilman felt like they were being successfully helped by their repressive male doctors, but it was still their only shot at being cured, demonstrating the agonizing circumstance of the time. They exercised resistance by writing despite their pain, which allowed for some relief and clarity after being met with constant misunderstanding.

As Woolf writes in her memoir “Moments of Being,” “But while we looked into the future, we were completely under the power of the past.” (147)

Women writers of previous centuries, from Sappho to Margery Kempe, were similarly saddled with notions of “madness,” though they were also not writing during the birth of psychoanalysis, and were some of the more prominent names in a sparse recorded history of the female literary tradition.

Woolf writes, “Of women: Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history... Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband” (“A Room of One’s Own” 45-46).

When discussing hysteria and women diagnosed with mental illness in relation to literature, it is important to remember that there is a lost history of those who wrote and could not be published, those who were prohibited to write, and those who never received a diagnosis or help due to the time’s medical shortcomings. Many of these factors applied to non-white women and poor women, as Laura Briggs outlines in the article, “The Race of Hysteria: ‘Overcivilization’ and the ‘Savage’ Woman in Late-Nineteenth Century Obstetrics and Gynecology.” She writes, “As a disease of ‘overcivilization,’ hysterical illness was the provenance almost exclusively of Anglo-American, native-born whites, specifically white women of a certain class.” (246)

In part because of this, Gilman and Woolf are two of the only women writers of the time known to have been diagnosed with hysteria, though this does not mean there were not more who reflected their situation but rejected the label or were silenced by others. Even so, there is little written on Woolf’s hysteria, despite her being one of the most noteworthy modernist writers, perhaps due to contemporary medicine’s rejection of hysteria in favor of more plausible posthumous diagnoses.

“It’s almost impossible to know because we don’t have a lot of first-person recordings from people that were treated or diagnosed with hysteria,” said Ada McVean, a science writer and staffer at McGill University’s Office for Science and Society, with degrees in both bio-organic chemistry and gender studies. “There is next to nothing, which I found amazing because how can that be possible? This was a very common diagnosis and none of these women ever wrote about their experience. But I think that has a lot to say with the position they were put into in society. They weren’t the kind of women who were valued for their words. Once they had this diagnosis, you know, we don’t listen to crazy women, we don’t listen to witches.”

Similarly, Woolf wonders why there is not a long tradition of female poets, especially considering Sappho’s position as a pioneer of lyric poetry. She answers her own question, writing

“For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty.” (“A Room of One’s Own” 51)

While the following authors were not diagnosed with hysteria, one could point at the ghost stories of Edith Wharton, the Brontë’s sisters’ mad women like Catherine Earnshaw and Bertha Mason, the agonizing poetry of Emily Dickinson, or the use of male pen names to conceal identities like George Eliot, as examples of how these women sought a voice when none was afforded to them. They may not have been deemed to be hysterical, but they reflect the work of Woolf and Gilman in the ways they bury the themes of their discontent in a literary disguise of rebellion.

Ultimately, the hysteria diagnosis was a tool used to sedate women who were outspoken in their dissatisfaction with how they were being told to live. Some cases were based on a rejection of matronly and heterosexual expectations, others were victims to hysteria’s use as a catch-all term for mental illness. It is impossible to say the hysteria diagnosis was not beneficial in certain cases, but there is a clear net negative when observing its legacy.

Upon its publication, Gilman sent a copy of “The Yellow Wallpaper” to Mitchell, which she was told years later caused him to alter his rest cure treatment. “If that is a fact,” Gilman wrote in her memoir, “I have not lived in vain.” (“The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman” 121)

If Gilman had not trusted her instincts and the proof of her suffering to break out of her “treatment,” Mitchell may have never learned the real harm it was causing on the female psyche and may have implemented it for years to come. Not only is this a staggering example of the effect literature can have, but the act of its creation was forbidden by the rest cure.

In “A Room of One’s Own,” Woolf reminisces about the women before her who wrote despite their oppression, writing, “What genius, what integrity it must have required in face of all that criticism, in the midst of that purely patriarchal society, to hold fast to the thing as they saw it without shrinking.” (77)

It is with the same admiration that Woolf, Gilman, and their peers can be dealt. They too experienced a cycle of agony that was only met with more misunderstanding and limitation, forcing them to either reject their surroundings or be confined to a lifetime of suffering, or both. This cycle is not characteristic only to a Modernist time period, but rather rears its ugliness in contemporary artist discourse as well, as seen in the “sad girl indie” pseudo-genre.

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So, What Exactly is “Sad Girl Indie?”

While the origins of the term “sad girl indie” are unknown, it has come to describe female musicians who primarily play guitar and sing, write emotionally revealing lyrics, and are around 20 to 30 years of age (if not younger).

One of the first notable acknowledgments came from Jia Tolentino's essay "The Wry Young Women Writing Sad, Buoyant, Beautiful Songs" for the *New Yorker* in 2018. Here she writes, "Young female singer-songwriters are often written about as founts of pure youthful angst and emotion, but each of these writers has a keen command of irony, and will often triangulate the sentiment of a lyric against the melody it rides on and the way she sings the line." The piece focuses on three releases from March of that year: Soccer Mommy's debut "Clean," Lucy Dacus' second LP "Historian," and Snail Mail's single "Pristine."

Each of these acts are at the forefront of "sad girl indie," alongside artists like Phoebe Bridgers, Waxahatchee, Japanese Breakfast, Julia Jacklin, and Mitski. The majority of these acts came out with their debut album around the mid-2010's, causing the movement to take shape around the time Tolentino wrote her piece. In the time since, the term "sad girl indie" has grown to include a new generation (z) of female singer-songwriters, taken over streaming services, and used as a moniker for fans on social media.

"Anything you try to market can inherently simplify whatever the thing is, because you're trying to message it to the largest amount of people in the fastest way possible," said Rachel Brodsky, a pop critic for *Stereogum*. "Inherently you will run the risk of making it sound sexist."

Spotify and TikTok are both responsible for exacerbating this labeling in their desire for profit, and in turn add to the reduction of these artists and their young fans to one-dimensional categories.

In a 2021 study conducted by the Music Technology Group, based in Barcelona, and Utrecht University, based in the Netherlands, findings show that streaming service recommendation algorithms, such as those used by Spotify, have a bias towards male artists. According to the study, the algorithm reproduces the bias of the dataset, where only 25% of the artists are women, and on average, a woman artist would not be played until song six or seven, indicating less exposure. This study is one reflection of the music world more broadly, where according to the sixth annual study on the music industry by Stacy L. Smith and the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, women artists made up 22.3% of the Billboard Hot 100 Year-End chart over an 11-year period.

In terms of "sad girl indie," the official Spotify "sad girl starter pack" has over a million saves from users and features 75 songs from various musicians, most of whom are labeled as sad girls. The playlist's description reads, "Sapphic songs that defined your music taste as 'yearning,'" though it is unclear how the majority of these songs are "sapphic," as only a portion of the artists included in the playlist identify as queer.

A Spotify representative failed to respond for comment.

Featured artists include the "sad it-girls" like Bridgers and Mitski, as well as younger examples like Lizzy McAlpine and Dora Jar, and older acts who Spotify deems "sad," remarkably including The Velvet Underground and The Smashing Pumpkins. There is no clear link between these songs besides falling somewhere on the spectrum of sadness, flattening catharsis, desire, and conflict into an amorphous "yearning."

On TikTok, #sadgirlmusic has 11.1 million views, with videos of users sharing playlists of the genre, expressing their love for the musicians associated, and identifying themselves as “sad girls.” This last point is more troubling, as the tag #sadgirl has 14.8 billion views, making the music of “sad girl indie” just a soundtrack for young people who have defined their personality or disposition as “sad.”

“It is interesting how the Internet has made private spaces public in this way that really speaks to the ‘sad girl’ aesthetic and speaks to [how] pain that used to be private and individual can become public and collective,” said Lindsay Zoladz, a pop music critic for The New York Times. “Most people doing a TikTok challenge or dancing on TikTok are just in their bedroom and there's a kind of intimacy to it. I think when I was a sad teen girl, it wasn't as visual.”

This last point, that there is now an optic associated with something that used to be hidden behind closed doors, may be partially responsible for this “sad girl” trend. Kids will always imitate other kids, and if this sadness appears desirable, many will adopt the looks of it or share their own depressive feelings, which did not happen in the same way in previous generations. This has little to do with the music of “sad girl indie,” but shows how this pseudo-genre has become as popular as it has, as well as how it continues to grow.

Marissa Matozzo, a staff writer at SheFinds who wrote her 2021 senior thesis for The New School on “sad girl indie,” was shocked to see how younger fans had become specifically attached to the “sad” elements of the music when at a Lucy Dacus and Hop Along show.

“There [were] these 14-year-old girls everywhere, and my friends [were] like, ‘How are we the oldest people here?’ They were all like... ‘I wanna hear her cry tunes. She makes the best cry tunes.’”

Ella Jane makes pop music, but she gets put into the “sad girl” label anyway. She believes that platforms like Spotify and TikTok model themselves to resemble teenage girls, one example being through Spotify Wrapped, which utilizes the language of Gen Z teenagers as a marketing tool for relevancy. At the same time, they are actively demeaning the same teen girls they emulate, by reducing the music many like to appear one-dimensional, which implies less legitimacy and skill.

“I think a huge part of all of it is branding,” Jane said. “I’m guilty of branding myself like that because when you are trying to self-promote on TikTok, you are basically catering to very short attention spans and I find the easiest way to attract listeners, unfortunately, is to be a little bit reductive when describing yourself.”

As a result, fans, especially young ones, follow in the same lead, seeing this “sadness” as something like an aspiration.

“I think there's something both subversive and empowering about almost exaggerating your sadness, or just having it take on this kind of performative quality, especially in a culture that still doesn't take young women seriously, doesn't take their pain seriously,” said Zoladz. “At the same time there's something really limiting about it too because no one is only sad, even if you're suffering from depression. There are so many facets to the human experience and to emotions.”

In “The Last Words of a Shooting Star,” a song about reflecting on one’s existence and relationships in the wake of a plane crash, Mitski sings, “And while my dreams made music in the night,/ Carefully I was going to live.” In under three minutes, the song displays struggle, acceptance, heartache, and desire, not to mention Mitski’s devotion to craft and precision. It is an example of “sad girl indie” at its best, and so much more.

“We live in a moment in time when women are being celebrated for making the most powerful rock music,” said Jenn Pelly, a contributing editor at Pitchfork. “That it could just be written off as “sad girl music,” like no. It is staggering music. It’s really, astonishingly vulnerable, and real, and raw.”

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In Their Own Words

Violet Lewis is a songwriting major at the University of California, Berkeley, doesn’t see herself as making sad songs, but rather takes painful experiences and attempts to write them into something beautiful, something that might make others feel joy or less alone. After getting the opportunity to pitch music to A&R reps, the artists and repertoire division of a record label responsible for scouting new talent, her outlook on the music she had always felt inclined to make has changed.

“A lot of them hate, more than anything, this ‘sad girl indie,’” Lewis said. “What I hear over and over from A&Rs is that, ‘The lane for female singer-songwriters is so crowded right now that it’s almost impossible to set yourself apart.’”

One A&R rep suggested to Lewis that she should start whispering all of her songs from that point forward, then at least she would have something that differentiates her. The result is that Lewis, along with many of her female musician friends, has started to break away from making singer-songwriter music, seeing no future based on what the business side of the industry has told her.

“A woman can make a song and she could be bedroom pop, and a guy could make the same song and be a rock star,” Lewis said. “I feel it is just not taken seriously, it is not seen as badass, even though any girl with a guitar is badass.”

Jenna Anderozzi, who is the band leader of Jay Rosie, remembers how when she debuted something she had been working on to one of her bandmates, he responded by saying he could totally hear it ending up on Spotify’s ‘sad girl indie’ playlist. It wasn’t until that point that she realized she might fall into this category of music.

“To simmer down something like, ‘All of these indie girls [who] are getting streams right now’ to something like “sad girl indie” feels very general,” Anderozzi said, “and it doesn’t encompass the depth of what is occurring in this generation of female musicians that are coming up and gaining popularity based on being able to emotionally connect with their audience.”

“So much of this, too, is about how artists can't have control over how people interpret their songs or interpret any part of their art, including their persona,” Zoladz said. “That's sort of the push and pull with the ‘sad girl’ thing, is it is mostly coming from fans or critics, and in some ways it is beneficial to the artists. It gives them kind of a genre to belong to and a certain shared fanbase, but I think it can feel to them, too, that it's limiting.”

Greta Klein, who performs as Frankie Cosmos, reflected about recently playing in a gig for her friend's band Gabby's World, whose music she describes as “textured, complex, pop music.” The show was on a college campus and the promo poster read “sad girl starter pack.” (The first playlist listed under the “Discovered on” section of their Spotify page reads, “sapphic yearning and sadness for lonely days.”)

Even though Klein personally is not a fan of the “sad girl indie” label, she generally just brushes it off. Seeing her friend described in this way, however, left a bitter taste in her mouth.

“‘Sad girl starter pack’ is more about the consumer of the music than the creator of it, like, it doesn't matter if the musicians you are lumping in there are gender non-conforming or in their 30s, the word ‘girl’ gets attached to it because that's the assumed listener,” Klein said. “It limits your audience. It's basically saying, your audience has to be girls, and ‘sad’ girls. Either way, it's a way of minimizing the work, for sure.”

After talking to Gabrielle Smith, who performs as Gabby's World, on the phone, Klein reached back out to add that by using this label, marketers display another way of minimizing anything that girls like.

In a 2018 piece for Jezebel, Hazel Cillis interviewed Julien Baker, Phoebe Bridgers and Lucy Dacus about the rising stereotypes of sad girls in music. The three remain at the forefront of the singer-songwriter genre, whether performing individually or together as the supergroup boygenius, a name that pokes fun at the ways men in music are mythologized. In the article, Bridgers describes a common fan interaction at shows.

“It makes me so sad when people come up to me and are like, ‘Com[ing] to tonight's show, even though what I usually do is stay inside with my crippling anxiety, ha ha ha! We're the same!’ And I'm like, let's talk about that,” Bridgers says in the interview. “I don't want it to be a Forever 21 t-shirt that's like, ‘I'm Sad AF.’ I don't want to sell people the idea that wallowing in your own misery is the thing.”

Baker added to this point, saying, “And then, the converse of that is you start to develop a reactionary unwillingness to share dark songs. I'll go through the trouble of crafting a nuanced, hopeful song that still comes across sad. You start to censor yourself, like you don't want to write a violent song, even though this imagery serves what you're trying to convey [because you're] at the risk of being pigeonholed.”

The obvious truth is that songwriters suffer from mental illness like everyone else, and sometimes this choice of profession feeds the flames. According to a 2019 study by Record Union which surveyed 1,489 indie musicians, 73% said they have experienced negative emotions such as stress, anxiety, and/or depression in relation to music creation.

Some of music-making's bleak realities include financial insecurity, the relentless exhaustion of touring, and a lack of stability. It seems only natural that writing about the difficulty of these experiences, and the other strife in their lives, would be a useful and even necessary outlet for musicians, a purpose that art has always served. The downside is that these artists can then become plagued by the labeling and expectations of their art, causing no escape from suffering.

"I think that was actually something that happened with the latest Mitski album, that there were people that were kind of like, 'It's not sad enough, she sounds too happy,' and it's like, that shouldn't be what we're evaluating the work on," Zoladz said. "But it is true that there's kind of a history of the confessional singer-songwriter, like having to mine the worst pain and heartbreak of their life to make the best music, and I think that can really become a trap for the artist."

Laura Elliott, a New York-based songwriter, has amassed over 150,000 monthly listeners on Spotify since the release of her debut album "People Pleaser" last year. Recently, she has begun to feel a certain expectation to be increasingly emotionally vulnerable in her music, as if her listeners only want her lyrics to be dealing with heartache.

"I have found that I literally cannot write music when I'm in a relationship and feeling good," Elliott said. "I start to feel like, 'Oh it's corny [that] I'm feeling good, no one wants to hear this,' and I sort of get into this cycle of being down on myself for feeling good."

It is this very dilemma, of a songwriter feeling they must become so attached to their sadness that they struggle feeling warmth, that Dacus calls attention to in the boygenius cover story for Rolling Stone's February 2023 issue. "I just want me and my friends to survive," she says. "When you internalize it, your personality is sadness, which is a lot of the time tied to depression, which a lot of the time is tied to detachment from life. I want the most joy that I can get, and I want that for everyone that I love."

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A Moment For Context

How can any single genre of music be called sad? Is not all modern music the result of rhythm and blues, country, jazz, and folk music, which all have their roots in the expression of struggle? How then, are these female singer-songwriters singular in their sadness? The obvious answer is they are not at all.

A similar term is "emo" or "emotional-hardcore," which was likely first printed in a 1986 edition of Thrasher magazine in reference to the Washington D.C., post-hardcore scene. Ian MacKaye, who at the time was a member of Embrace, called Thrasher's use of the term emo "the stupidest fucking thing I've ever heard in my entire life," before adding, "As if hardcore wasn't emotional to begin with."

Being a student and innovator of alternative music, MacKaye knew that emotion was never at odds with the music one played, but rather an integral and inseparable part of the process. To say the music he was playing was suddenly emotional was an insult.

“I think that for some reason there is this kind of resistance to history among younger music fans who grew up on the internet, and I think that’s a problem when you’re trying to actually get at the truth of something,” said Pelly, the Pitchfork contributing editor. “The truth is that any number of so-called ‘sad girl’ singer-songwriters exists in an enormous lineage of women exploring their pain, suffering, and mental illness in art, and that one, is not a new phenomenon and two, to call it ‘sad girl’ or even ‘sad boy’ like, is really reductive and it doesn’t really make sense to me.”

For one, Pelly grew up adoring Fiona Apple, who writes expertly revealing lyrics, such as “He said, ‘It’s all in your head,’/ And I said, ‘So is everything,’/ But he didn’t get it,” and “I’m amorous but out of reach/ A still life drawing of a peach.” What is so different from Apple, a young, female, singer-songwriter, and those now deemed “sad girls?” What about the work of Liz Phair, Hope Sandoval, Tori Amos, Sinéad O’Connor, Lucinda Williams, Tracy Chapman, Joni Mitchell, Joan Armatrading, and Carole King? Would one ever dare call Connie Converse a “sad girl,” or Billie Holiday for that matter?

“There is just a history of women singer-songwriters being diaristic and in their feelings and this just happens to be the latest iteration,” said Brodsky, the Stereogum pop critic. “I think this is something that we’ve seen for decades take place, and this just happens to be a way it’s culminated.”

Part of this has to do with the way music is now consumed through streaming, which automatically grants access to everything at a cost of value and context. Previously, one would find out about an album, through a magazine review, the local record store clerk, or a radio host. Now, listeners need to look no further than their automatically generated playlists from whatever streaming service they subscribe to, or the “sad girl starter pack.”

“The way music is delivered has been so streamlined and commodified, and convenient in a way that there’s all this information that is lost in that process,” said Pelly. “All Spotify cares about is people becoming dependent on the convenience of it and the ease of it. All these musicians that we’re talking about, they have such unique paths, with unique musical DNA that they’re bringing to their work.”

Charlie Hickey, a singer-songwriter who has collaborated with Jane and is the only man on Bridgers’ Saddest Factory Records label, notes that the field is so dominated by female singer-songwriters at the moment, that as a male singer-songwriter, he feels a little out on his own.

“I think it’s maybe particularly confusing for a male artist now because there is maybe something liberating about not having anyone to be lumped in with, but then there’s also something kind of anxiety-provoking about it when you go and try and figure out how to present yourself,” he said.

Some have claimed “sad boy indie” to be a sort of genre as well, though it clearly doesn’t have the impact of its feminine counterpart, and most of the male artists who would be considered “sad boys” are not limited to its singular identity. It of course should be questioned just like “sad girl indie,” but there is not the same tradition of downplaying and delegitimizing male voices in music that lurks behind the term like there is for non-cis male artists.

James Blake, a producer and singer-songwriter, posted a tweet with a written statement in 2018 raging against the notion of “sad boy” and the ways men are told to conceal their emotions and instead project personas of fortitude. “I’ve always found that expression unhealthy and problematic when used to describe men just openly talking about their feelings,” he wrote. “To label it at all, when we don’t ever question women discussing the things they are struggling with, contributes to the ever disastrous historical stigmatisation of men expressing themselves emotionally.”

While Blake certainly makes some points against a traditional aversion to acknowledging male suffering and the ways it can be perpetuated, he is less on the mark in his claim that women’s expression of emotion is never questioned. In this sense, he fails to see the true dilemma, and while, once again, no one should be labeled by a single emotion, the issue is not weighted equally in this binary examination. Additionally, Hickey denied personally being called a “sad boy” and does not feel it is a relevant label.

Furthermore, it is unclear why certain acts are considered “sad girl indie,” while others are not. What is keeping Taylor Swift from being deemed as such? She is a singer-songwriter who writes skillfully and emotionally, has been continuously pegged as the hysterical ex-girlfriend, and her first six albums were released through an independent label. Is it because she resembles the most popular girl in school, like her alter-ego in the “You Belong With Me” music video? Is it because she has been made out to be vengeful, crazy, and pathetic rather than plain “sad?” This is the point where logic begins to erode in the wake of classifying real, dynamic people into a singular emotional trait. Like Pelly said, “It makes no sense.”

It is also apparent that the most prominent acts of “sad girl indie” are predominantly white, cis-women who fit a Euro-centric beauty standard. Some exceptions include Mitski, Japanese Breakfast’s Michelle Zauner, Indigo De Souza, Arlo Parks and beabadoobee’s Bea Kristi. Transfem singer-songwriters, like Ethel Cain and Ezra Furman, are not discussed as being “sad girls,” in the same way, creating a catch-22 where it feels transphobic for these women to not be included in an inherently sexist space.

In an article for TN2 magazine headlined, “A Portrait of the Artist as Just, Like, A Really Sad Woman,” Gale Aitken writes, “Of the artists that are most prominent in the ‘sad girl’ sphere, black women in particular are in the minority. The link between fragility and white womanhood is a historical one, and one that is clearly reflected in this group of artists.”

In this way, “sad girl indie” becomes a hegemonic designation, negligent of intersectionality in its limited scope. Like with hysteria, the term and those who choose to promote it fail to be diverse, condensing not just emotion, but also the type of person who gets to

be seen as this “sad” stereotype, aka cis-white women. The exclusion filters mental illness through a white perspective, in turn alienating more than alleviating.

* * *

Retiring the “Sad Girl” Shtick

“Sad girl indie” demonstrates a lose-lose pattern. In a reflection of hysteria’s failure, these artists express their anguish in the hopes of expelling it, only to get labeled and trapped, causing that anguish to be exacerbated and renewed. Like with any dilemma, there are possible silver linings that materialize from the term, but ultimately, “sad girl indie” alienates and offends the very artists it attempts to categorize, and deludes many young fans into thinking this “sadness” is suitable as an identity.

It seems the only thing that really binds the musicians labeled as “sad girls” is their distaste for the term “sad girl.” Some superficially embrace the phrase for branding purposes, and others claim a general indifference to it, like Klein (Frankie Cosmos), who said, “I’m not great with genres in general, so whatever people want to call it doesn’t matter to me that much, but it’s definitely not how I perceive myself.”

Part of this may have to do with the distinct writing voice Klein has, one that carries a paucity and playfulness that dissolves like sugar on the listener’s tongue. On “Fool” the song of hers that went viral on TikTok, Klein sings, “Your name is a triangle/ Your heart is a square/ I love to see you/ Way over there,” and on the lesser known “Same Thing,” “Nothing is deserved/ Nothingness is earned/ Like the pillow’s cold side/ Rewards your sleeping/ With more of the same thing.”

Sure, one could look at these lyrics on a surface level and find “sadness,” citing notions of impenetrable distance and what could be interpreted as a subtle nihilism, but to do so would neglect the equally present aspects of delight and courage. Whether it be the joy of getting to observe a beloved or relish in the gift of sleep, there is an optimistic pulse that beats through the heart of Klein’s work that would be incorrectly judged as “sad.” A similar analysis could be offered to any one of the so-called “sad girls,” for no one’s work should be reduced to a single-word moniker.

Similarly, Woolf’s legacy is often consumed by her depression and suicide, though this reflects a fraction of her personhood. Woolf wrote in a September 1919 diary entry, “I think perhaps nine people out of ten never get a day in the year of such happiness as I have almost constantly.” This is not the Woolf many wish to acknowledge or celebrate, but alas, her words speak for themselves.

“I was kind of shoved into [the “sad girl” label],” Elliott said, “But thinking about the artists that I admire that have been around forever, of course I don’t want this term to be used for the people that I look up to and hope to be like, and I don’t want to put myself within that, either.”

It is for this reason Gilman wrote “The Yellow Wallpaper,” with the aim to expose hysteria and the rest cure’s catch-all diagnosis from the perspective of one trapped in its clutch. If those afflicted don’t voice dissent and resist docility, the problem will remain.

Anderozzi, of Jay Rosie, echoed these same sentiments, and noted how the creative process rarely allows a piece of work to have a fixed meaning, as time and growth away from a subject will always implicate it.

“When you work on something for several months, it becomes something much bigger than just a sad song,” Anderozzi said. “It’s a much different level of intensity and your relationship to it changes.”

Whether an artist feels like their work should not be represented as “sad” because their own connection to the content has changed, because they are displaying equal measures of joy, or because they are expressing true suffering rather than just “sadness,” their perspective should be acknowledged. It would not just benefit their mentality as artists, but also the young fans who are being misled into thinking a representation of “sadness” to be not just desirable but honorable, when instead they should be afforded the basic perception of complexity and depth.

In a video interview with Crack Magazine in January of 2022, Mitski reacted to fans’ tweets as promotion for her most recent album “Laurel Hell,” saying, “You know, the sad girl thing was reductive and tired like 5-10 years ago, and it still is today...Let’s retire the “sad girl” shtick. It’s over.”

It seems unlikely this will happen as dominating streaming services and social media platforms benefit from the commodification of identity and art, but as consumers the practice of being wary and choosing value and patience over convenience are a form of resistance. To acknowledge the humanity of the artists one admires may deepen one’s bond with their material and grant a greater sense of personal respect as a listener.

Anyone who is a lifelong music fan knows it is no light thing. To treat artists and their fans with such laziness shouldn’t be either.

Source List:

- Marissa Matozzo (Writer at SheFinds instagram: rissnata)
- Jenn Pelly (Pitchfork contributing editor jennpelly@gmail.com)
- Gaura Narayan (Professor of literature at SUNY Purchase gaura.narayan@purchase.edu)
- Lindsay Zoladz (New York Times pop music critic (856) 535-7664)
- Rachel Brodsky (Stereogum pop music critic (347) 726-1410)
- Jenna Anderozzi (Indie singer-songwriter (401) 500-5238)
- Laura Elliott (Indie singer-songwriter (845) 522-2286)
- Violet Lewis (Indie singer-songwriter (310) 621-6163)
- Ada McVean (Science communicator for McGill ada.mcvean@mail.mcgill.ca)
- Greta Klein (Indie singer-songwriter bekahzf@subpop.com)
- Ella Jane (Indie singer-songwriter (914) 336-1514)
- Charlie Hickey (Indie singer-songwriter (626) 491-3162)
- Peter Fifield (Author and lecturer of modern literature at Birkbeck p.fifield@bbk.ac.uk)

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