

**Existing as a Woman in Music**

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### **Abstract**

Female-identifying musicians face sexism and various forms of discrimination within the music industry from their male counterparts. This sexism reveals itself in the forms of gender-based pay disparity, sexual harassment and assault from men, and the enforcement of patriarchal ideals and expectations. Due to the fact that men hold the most power in the industry, this discrimination is a repeated cycle, and continues to diminish the potential success, sense of self worth, and importance of women in the patriarchal world of music. Many women have spoken out against this injustice, in the form of journalism, the Riot Grrrl movement, and expression through music itself. It is crucial to understand how this bigotry has progressed over time, as well as how both men and women can fight back against this discrimination. This is essential in order to put an end to patriarchal systems that actively work against women and aim to diminish their sense of worth and potential in the music industry.

### **Existing as a Woman in Music**

Sex, drugs, rock & roll, and internalized misogyny - this is the world in which the Riot Grrrl movement came into existence. In the music industry, artists have the ability to incite social change through their music. But what happens when one gender has significantly more power than the other? What can be done when men have control over the potential success of female artists, leaving them high and dry in hopes of maintaining this already patriarchal system? Misogyny within the independent music industry is detrimental to a female musician's sense of worth, talent, and importance. As a result of this blatant sexism, in order to fight this male-dominated system, members and supporters of the Riot Grrrl Movement developed a plan:

to dismantle the patriarchy that controls music, and to evenly distribute power amongst women in this male-dominated field.

Misogyny within the independent music industry is detrimental to a female musician's sense of worth, talent, and importance within this already patriarchal system. Similarly, this bigotry has the ability to enforce an unbalanced pay rate between male and female musicians by ultimately affecting the overall success of certain specific marketing and distribution of music content based on gender, leaving women less likely for musical prosperity. According to a study published by *Popular Music and Society*, male artists experienced more chart success than female artists on the *Hot Billboards 100* charts between the years of 1997 and 2007 (LaFrance). This leads to a severe lack of representation of relatable women, as well as women in general, to inspire younger generations of potential female musicians. Artists such as Bratmobile, Le Tigre, Bikini Kill, and Sleater Kinney have made massive strides in the fight towards total gender equality between men and women within the music industry. Similarly, many women have already taken stands by speaking out about the situations of abuse that they've faced from their male counterparts within the music industry, with hopes of encouraging other women to do the same. Among these women were those who created and maintained the infamous Riot Grrrl movement, an underground feminist punk movement originating in the early 1990s in Washington State as a result of gender inequality and the desire to increase female presence within the music scene.

In an interview conducted by Frank Digiacomio, Dorothy Carvello spoke out about the misogynistic treatment that she had to endure while working with a primarily male executive staff. Carvello began her career as an assistant to Ahmet Ertegun, the founder of Atlantic

Records; she later became the label's first female A&R executive. In her time experiencing discrimination from her male counterparts, Dorothy had kept diary entries regarding her issues with gender bias in the workplace, and realized that these entries could make a good book. She speaks directly about Ertgun's misogynistic behavior and misconduct, and how she tried to fit in among the more carefree men in the workplace. "Watching men behave freely is very attractive when you're a repressed young woman. I thought that by running with them and enabling them to behave in a disrespectful fashion, I was one of them--but I wasn't. I didn't want to admit I was being paid less. I didn't want to admit I was being passed over for promotions because that would have deflated my dream of being an executive in the music business" (Digiacomio).

She also explains the pay disparity that existed in her time working at Atlantic Records, explaining that she received much less than her male counterparts. "I tapped out at 60 grand, which was like the weekly [travel and expenses report] for the male executives, who were making well over six figures. After all, they had families to support. I heard that many times. I was also told by one of the men at Atlantic, "No babies [for you] on my watch." This blatant disrespect and exploitation of a woman's work for the benefit of the already-too-accessible success of men further proves that, when men hold the most power in a field, they have the power to make or break the careers of women, and will work day and night to protect the careers of their male counterparts (Digiacomio).

Even when women in the music industry are recognized for their talent, agencies will go to the ends of the earth to control the appearance and overall outward personality in a way that reinforces our preconceived ideas of femininity. Despite this, several female musicians have

began to speak out against the unjust treatment of women in the industry, as well as discussing their own accounts of abuse that they've received from their male counterparts.

One of the most recent and widely known cases of misogyny within the music industry happened between pop singer Ke\$ha and her ex-music producer, Lukasz Sebastian Gottwald, known as Dr. Luke. The original suit that was filed in California in October of 2014 included an accusation by Ke\$ha against Dr. Luke of accounts of emotional and physical harassment and assaults. Ke\$ha claimed that Dr. Luke was guilty of gender-based discrimination and violence, civil and sexual harassment, violation of California's laws regarding unfair practices of business, and the imposition of emotional distress. Dr. Luke had denied such allegations, claiming that the statements and accusations made by Ke\$ha were simply defamatory lies told to slander his name and career in an attempt to force Dr. Luke to release Ke\$ha from their exclusive recording agreement (Tsioulcas).

Ke\$ha tried all that she could to remove herself from said recording agreement, so that she would no longer have to endure this abuse from Dr. Luke. However, on February 19th, 2016, her request for injunction from the contract was denied. One fan of hers went so far as developing a petition in hopes of freeing Ke\$ha from the restriction being under the management of Dr. Luke, which received over 10,000 signatures, signaling immense support for Ke\$ha from fans and general feminists alike who refuse to stand for this inappropriate, extremely offensive behavior from men in power. Unfortunately, the abuse claims made by Ke\$ha were dismissed by New York Judge Shirley Kornreich. "While Kesha's [claim] alleges that she was sexually, physically and verbally abused by Gottwald for a decade, she describes only two specific instances of physical/sexual abuse," Kornreich stated, adding, "And the most recent event

described was alleged to have happened in 2008 and so falls outside of the statute of limitations" (Kornhaber). Eventually, in August of 2016, over 18 months since the first filing of the charges, Ke\$ha dropped her abuse case in LA, explaining that the lawsuit has essentially been weighing too heavy on her, and does not seem to have a just end in sight.

In many cultures, femininity is considered as an attribute that makes one weak, or lesser than masculine counterparts. Our society has enforced the stigma that women have a very specific role, including being the primary caretaker for their families, and having to give up on any chance to make a name for themselves in their field of interest, let alone attend college to figure out what that field may be. Women are expected to not dream any bigger than the box that our patriarchal society has forced them into; one of professional and social expectations that are not pushed onto men.

The music industry has remained a patriarchal system in which men thrive, while women are given much lower expectations when it comes to talent. Men are in a position of power that allows them to distribute said power to other men, inherently perpetuating the cycle of an unbalance allocation of respect and success solely based on gender. These notions ultimately result in a severely unbalanced wage gap between men and women, turning a blind eye to the issues of both sexual and emotional harassment of women in both the performing and business sectors of the music industry, and less opportunities for women due to the lack of institutional support from their male counterparts. Even the presence of females in non-performance based sectors of the music industry is extremely slim, due to most working producers and engineers being male.

One of the most effective ways to comprehend this gender-based discrimination is to listen to and analyze the experiences of female musicians. Lauren Mayberry, lead singer, keyboardist, and producer of Glasgow band CHVRCHES spoke out about her own personal experiences with gender based attacks on women in the music scene. In September 2013, Mayberry released an informed article to The Guardian, condemning the online misogyny that she was forced to endure through online comments, and even threats, from “fans” (Coleman).

The article was prompted by the band receiving a large number of offensive messages that were directed at Mayberry personally, stating that these acts of hatred towards her, as a woman, made her feel extremely objectified and violated. She explains, “I am not a martyr, nor am I attempting to change the world in any revolutionary way. I am only in a band, not one of the many wonderful people in organisations striving for change. My involvement in this discussion is not motivated by a self-righteous or self-pitying urge. My hopes are that if anything good comes out of this, it will start a conversation, or continue the conversation which is already happening, encouraging others to reject an acceptance of the status quo, and that our band can continue to do what we are doing in our own way and on our own terms.”

In this article, Mayberry identifies herself, unapologetically, as a feminist, arguing against “the casual objectification of women, and further proposing that a public female figure’s fame is not an invitation to this treatment” (Coleman). The purpose of Mayberry’s release of the article was to direct it towards female musicians in an attempt to shed more light on this way too common occurrence of blatant incivility towards female musicians for no other reason than their gender. The misogynistic actions of certain men online were made visible, and due to Mayberry’s public defiance against misogyny, this showed that she possessed “the power not

only to make what was hidden visible, but also to do so with the endorsement of an internationally respected media outlet” (Coleman).

A similar story is told by Bethany Cosentino, songwriter, guitarist, and vocalist of the band Best Coast. Cosentino, like Mayberry, was disgusted with the outright vulgar, misogynistic commentary directed specifically towards her and not her other male band mates. “Cosentino asserted that criticisms about demeanor, appearance, or outfits are predominantly directed towards female musicians, citing, for example, a review of Best Coast that chastised her for not smiling enough but did not mention her male counterparts” (Coleman). Women are expected to consistently uphold the appearance of a well-kept woman, embodying femininity, softness, and grace in both physical appearance and attitude. In contrast, men can wear virtually anything they want, as they are already seen as more talented than women, therefore their appearance holds significantly less weight. Cosentino is yet another woman who upholds the idea of living unapologetically as a woman, in contrast with the general expectations of women in society and the male-powered music industry.

Considering the overwhelming presence of sexism within the music industry, combined with the large number of women who have voiced their experiences in hopes of raising awareness and influencing younger generations of female indie musicians, it is understandable that a movement would be incited by a number of powerful women who aim to fight the patriarchy and bring more women into music. Riot Grrrl, developed in the 1990s, was an internationally known underground feminist movement that had originally surfaced from the alternative and punk music scenes of the West Coast. The Riot Grrrl movement was created in the spring of 1991, “after Allison Wolfe, Molly Neuman and Jen Smith (fanzine editors and



members of the band Bratmobile) created a collectively authored feminist zine called Riot Grrrl. At the same time, Kathleen Hanna (of the band Bikini Kill and zine by the same name) began organizing weekly 'Riot Grrrl' meetings with about twenty other young females" (Dunn).

This purpose of this movement was to act as a "response to the cultural and political marginalization of young women and girls" (Downes). In contrast to the more innocent or naive "Girl Power!" message of the Spice Girls, the Riot Grrrl movement seemed to sought out the complete dismantlement of men in power and societal ideals of femininity. "Whereas the riot grrrls rejected normative femininity, the Spice Girls embraced it; and, whereas the riot grrrls positioned girls as producers, the Spice Girls positioned girls as consumers" (Hains). It combined the ideologies of the punk music scene, feminist thinking, and politics to create a coalition of both men and women who encouraged other female musicians and women in general to express themselves in the same way that men are allowed to in music. Women in music desired the ability represent themselves without having the expectation of remaining feminine. For example, girl bands of the 1990s including Hole, L7, Babes in Toyland, 7 Year Bitch, and Bikini Kill "used ugliness in their music, performance, and appearance as a form of resistance to cultural representations of 'pretty' femininity" (Keenan).

Bands who considered themselves to be supporters of the Riot Grrrl movement, such as Bratmobile, Le Tigre, Bikini Kill, and Sleater Kinney, often aimed to use their power and music to create more conversation on the issues of rape, sexuality, domestic abuse, and the patriarchy. Both men and women alike are aware that female musicians, even prior to the Riot Grrrl movement, had already been making names for themselves to an extent. "Punk music and culture are not essentially male but are socially (re)produced as masculine within a set of contested

gendered spaces, discourses, and practices” (Downes). This means that, although women were somewhat recognized in the punk music scene, the parameters that they followed to succeed in the scene were originally set by the men who consistently push patriarchal ideas wherever they dominated. Simply being recognized was not enough for the women of this punk subculture; a social change in which misogyny is dismantled and removed completely from the music scene so that women are able to have the same opportunities as men do.

Not only did the women of the Riot Grrrl movement fight for the mere existence of women in the punk music scene, but they also fought for the general normalization of women expressing their emotions in the same way that men do. Another goal of the Riot Grrrl movement was to push for women to be allowed to show their negative emotions as well, especially anger. For centuries, women have been expected to maintain a feminine, soft demeanor without expressing their sadness or anger, as these emotions are considered “weak” to those who enforce the toxic, emotionless stigma developed around masculinity.

Women sought out to be able to portray their own masculinity in the way that they wrote music, performed, and generally carried themselves. These women did succeed, however, the Riot Grrrl movement was soon categorized as more of a social movement, rather than a musical one. Members of the Riot Grrrl movement focused on giving consistent support to other women in the music scene, as well as “problematized the female body by talking about female desires, body parts and more taboo subjects such as incest and rape in an up-front and confrontational manner”. Similarly, these women emphasized the importance of allowing younger girls to express and discuss their experiences, “as demonstrated through the fact that they were ‘Grrrls’, not women” (Strong). They definitely succeeded in inspiring other women to ignore the

expectations thrown upon them by this patriarchal society, and encouraged them to create their own expectations for themselves.

Dana Ayotte and Jacqueline Gullion of The Stunts approached this discussion of bringing light to this gendered discrimination by addressing their own experiences and the effects that they have on feminism in music and the presence of women in the music scene. The Stunts formed in 1999, becoming Vancouver's only lesbian indie-rock band, and continued to play together until 2004. Dana explains that when she had joined the Stunts, she had just recently started volunteering with the Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's shelter, a collectively run, woman-only, anti-violence organization where she had actually met her bandmate, Jacqueline Gullion. Dana discusses how sharing the same social and political views with Jacqueline added to their connection, as friends and as a band. "As a result we brought a shared political vision to the band, even though when we started out, we didn't sit down and say, 'let's form a feminist band.' We were all tired of the endless number of boy bands in the scene and agreed the band would be woman-only." This marked the beginning of The Stunts' feminism-driven songwriting and collaborative strategizing as an all-woman indie rock band (Ayotte). Starting out as Vancouver's only lesbian indie-rock band and helping in kicking off the Riot Grrrl movement, whilst implementing and maintaining beliefs of "pro-women" and "anti-patriarchy", The Stunts were able to encourage other female rockers and women in general to be unapologetically female, whatever that may mean to different women.

Reading these accounts from women in the music industry made me question if, after time has passed, the music industry has gotten any better on distributing respect and pay to both men and women, equally. These accounts of violence and disrespect against women are

something that is far too common even today, so I realized that my goal was to gain knowledge and general information from young men and women who are members of the local music scene today. In an attempt to truly understand the weight that gender based discrimination holds in the music industry, I interviewed a few indie musicians from Purchase College to get their take on misogyny in music, and how we can combat it. I sought out to present an unbiased look into the lives of both male and female musicians in order to understand both the male and female perspectives of how prevalent this discrimination is. Pauli Jennette, a male identifying indie musician, was willing to give me some insight into his experiences with other female artists, and in being an ally for these female artists.

I initially asked him if he had worked with or collaborated with any female artists, and how that experience might have differed from his working with male artists. He replied, “I find that, when I work with female artists, it’s much more productive - more work is done, and there’s less fucking around. I can appreciate that.” This idea can stem from the comfortable that men already feel, being in a position of power within the music scene, which causes them to believe that they do not need to work as hard as their female counterparts. Similarly, women generally are often expected to participate more in the emotional and mental aspects of creating, as opposed to the more hands on aspects that are habitually controlled by men. This speaks to the stigma that women are expected to cater to men in most aspects of life, even it means “dumbing themselves down” in order to secure the success of men. Similarly, I inquired about his experiences in witnessing harassment from men towards women in a music setting, such as a rehearsal or a concert. “Guys make weird comments and gestures towards girls at shows all of

the time. Yeah, in that case I've had to tell a couple of guys to back up, or I've had to physically walk in between to people to prevent something from happening.”

The way that Pauli spoke to me about his experiences and insight into the topic was very interesting; he spent very little time talking about what he has done to stick up for women, and kept the conversation geared specifically towards the female experience as told by females. He was not inherently looking for recognition or praise from me, a female-identifying musician, but rather he focused on discussing specific issues and expectations that society holds against women.

To end the interview, I asked Pauli if he had any advice for other male identifying artists who want to be allies for female identifying artists, without stripping women of their own voices. “I think it's quite simple: be appropriate. Don't put people in a box, and don't be so quick to judge other artists. A lot of the time, when I go to concerts in the city and see a female identifying artist start to perform on stage, I feel like the guys will pay less attention, especially if they don't have a band backing them up. People are just trying to play their music, man. And it's like, I'm pretty sure if this was a white guy with an undercut, you'd be paying more attention. The true thing about being an artists is making due with what you have, especially in the face of adversity. The simplest way to put it is to just shut up, listen to the music, and take it for what it is.”

In order to fully understand the female perspective, I began with interviewing Quinn Lindsay, an 18 year old Studio Composition major at Purchase College. She has been an active member of the music scene for roughly 5 years, starting off in a band and then segueing into creating and performing her own solo music. Quinn explained that the majority of her music

embodies past experiences or traumas that she has had to deal with. In interviewing her, I really aimed to hear about a specific time in which she experienced or witnessed gender discrimination within her local music scenes or the music industry in general.

“I had a mentor at my previous high school who created a program called Duality of Music. He told me that I was one of the best applicants and invited me to be his mentee. In this program, we were put into groups - I was placed in a group with a guy who made beats, and who already assumed that my gender implied that I would solely be the vocalist. This guy just did not want to work with me, and wasn't really interested in collaborating. I went to speak to my mentor about this, and asked him to speak to the guy about why he won't work with me. My mentor replied that he was actually going to come speak to *me* first about the situation, because the guy actually came to my mentor and said I was being too bossy, and that, as a female, you need to be less controlling because that can actually make you come off as a bitch.”

I was floored by this anecdote, and the audacity of Quinn's mentor to use this language. This experience portrays the stigma that, when men are outspoken and aggressive with their work, they are considered determined and good leaders. In contrast, when a woman acts the same, she is considered “bossy” or a “bitch”. This discouragement and push back from her mentor could have severely impacted that way she wrote her music and what she wrote about, and could have ultimately resulted in a skewed view of what Quinn's role is in the music industry as a woman. Thankfully, Quinn did not lose sight of the message she wanted to send to her audience and, as a result of this blatant discrimination from her mentor, she went on to write a feminist anthem, which included the line “I am as strong as any man”. Unfortunately, yet not

surprisingly, the same mentor responded saying that that line is “politically incorrect”, because by saying that Quinn was as strong as any man, it was inherently “putting down women”.

The thought process of this mentor itself ultimately implies that even attempting to compare a woman’s strength to that of a man is belittling to men, implying that women themselves are weak, and an unfavorable gender identity. Quinn went on to mention how, when she is performing, sound engineers will often assume that female artists do not know the signals or how to generally communicate what type of sound set up they need, and will begin “man-splaining” it. The sound engineers are responsible for maintaining the volume and quality of the sound at a show, usually according to the preferences of the artists performing. There are various universal hand signals, gestures, and lingo that are used during this process which most musicians, regardless of gender, are well versed in. Quinn explained that these engineers will simply assume that she hasn’t been performing for as long as her male counterparts, implying that she does not understand how to communicate with sound professionals. Hearing these varying forms of gender discrimination, both blatant and discreet, further enforces the idea that men hold a majority of the power in the music industry, and women are seemingly expected to remain in the state of complete ignorance when it comes to male-dominated fields. This is threatening because men have the power to keep men in power, as well as to keep women “in their place”, according to the societal stigmas and expectations of them.

The primary goal of feminists in music and self-identified members of the Riot Grrrl movement was to incite change, both within ourselves and outwardly in society. In this sense, female artists had begun unapologetically celebrating “girlhood as a means of fostering female youth subculture and of constructing narratives that disrupt patriarchal discourse within

traditionally male rock” (Wald). The efforts of those who identified with the Riot Grrrl movement closely connect with the current issues of general bias based on gender within the music industry, as well as pay disparity between men and woman doing the same work. “A study published in the journal *Social Currents* in December 2016 surveyed 33,801 people who worked in the arts and found that women make \$20,000 less, on average, than men. This is about the same disparity that exists across most U.S. industries” (Travis). This difference in pay for the same work and talent level is completely unjust and inherently promotes the superiority of men in the music industry.

LA pop band Haim were reported to have actually fired their agent when they found out that they were being paid roughly one-tenth of what male music artists were being paid at a music festival they had played at a year before (Andrews). This blatant disrespect towards women in the music scene is not hidden well, and persists due to the fact that men hold the most power and influence in the industry, leaving little to no room for women to progress to the same standards as men. Music industry professionals such as agents and promoters tend to enforce the stigma that female artists draw less attention and revenue than male artists, claiming that men are more versatile, and masculinity is more desirable and marketable than femininity. Even entertainment outlets such as MTV often offer little to no diversity when it comes to the gender of the musicians they most frequently feature. The USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative conducted a study that analyzed 600 songs that had appeared on the Billboard 100 chart from 2012 to 2017. Only 22 percent of the songs were performed by women, and only 12 percent were written by women (Andrews). Similarly, only 2 percent of those songs were even produced by women; pop songs can often include several producers, but most of the songs analyzed in this



study did not have a credit from a women.

It is crucial to understand the overall underlying issue here: due to the fact that men hold most of the power in terms of the music industry, literature, and society as a whole, this gives men the ability to distribute power to their “friends” or other male colleagues, therefore maintaining our already male-dominated society. Furthermore, these men in power now have the ability to continuously perpetuate the narrative that men will always be more capable than women, ultimately influencing younger men and women to think the same way, and hesitate to fight against it, as it is the “norm”.

Overall, this concept of women being less important as men in the music scene can have one potentially detrimental effect: the lack of representation of women in music can convince younger generations of potential female music artists to not follow the path of being a musician, because they will not have many role models to look up to. Although many female artists in indie music have made names for themselves, such as St. Vincent, Mitski, and Lorde, there still remains a large gap in the respect, pay, and recognition that men and women receive in the music industry.

Men have just as much responsibility in this fight for gender equality in the music industry as women do, as they ultimately hold most of the power within the industry, and can make real changes in the way female musicians are treated. This gender bias is a result of differences in societal expectations of men and women, and can too easily be learned and repeated by younger generations, young men included. The overrepresentation of men holding prominent roles in music inherently enforces ideologies of toxic masculinity, and can cause younger generations of male musicians to believe that, because the music industry is primarily

made up of men, they too can easily make it in music, without any consideration for women having that same opportunity.

To change the discrimination within the industry, men must be allies to women, and use their privilege to pave ways and give voices to those women who are shut down by this patriarchal system. The Riot Grrrl movement paved way for the allowance of women to express their emotions, primarily anger, through their writing and their music. The movement essentially moved to, and succeeded to, inspire women to take their rightful places in male dominated industries and shed the stereotypical ideas of what “femininity” should sound and look like. Members of the movement “encouraged participants to express anger that they felt at the way they had been treated or victimized due to their gender, thus colonizing the ‘traditionally’ male territory of anger” (Strong). The responsibility of ensuring an equal playing field between men and women is that of both men and women; men should also be expected to speak out against their male musician peers when they are showing disregard for the importance of women in music. While men have the power to influence other men in power, women have the ability to incite change in numbers by encouraging other women to join in their fight against misogyny..

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