Women and Men: Gender in the Music Business: Historical Overview

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WOMEN AND MEN: GENDER IN THE MUSIC BUSINESS

Introduction and Overview

Today, we will discuss Gender in the Music Industry. First, I will provide an historical overview of gender since the mid-20th century in light of performative theory, with Marisa focusing on cross-gender tribute bands. Then Christy and Lexi will cover issues of sexuality and objectification, followed by Nate and Burton on the topic of dress and performance. Wrapping things up, Tom and Edwin will discuss issues of privilege, power, and pay within the industry.

It may be true that “all the world’s a stage,” but the music industry is ideal for displaying gender in ways that 1) portray heteronormativity, 2) verge on and even push gender boundaries, and 3) consciously break gender conventions. The music business exemplifies a model of communication: one side produces the artifacts, and the other side performs those artifacts. This is the essence of performative theory which, according to our textbook, “argues that humans generate identities, including gender, through performance or expression” (Wood, p. 55). Judith Butler refers to some types of gendered performances as parodic. She goes on to say:

That the body is a set of possibilities signifies (a) that its appearance in the world, for perception, is not predetermined by some manner of interior essence, and (b) that its concrete expression in the world must be understood as the taking up and rendering specific of a set of historical possibilities. . . . These possibilities are necessarily constrained by available historical conventions (Butler p. 521).

The gender performances we will discuss indeed relied on and built upon previously communicated performances to create new imitative forms of expression.

A Recent History of Gender in Music

Even with the advent of the Rock Star in the 1950s, artists still typically followed gender conventions. But Little Richard stormed the stage, causing controversy with his flamboyant costumes and high over-the-top style, broad smile and “ladies style” hair-dos, sensual dance moves, and comfort singing in the soprano range. It wasn’t long until culture in the late 60s and
early 70s began to reflect that gender-bending: Many males grew their hair long, wore floral print shirts and stacked heel shoes, and eschewed the mid-century vision of what it meant to be “a man,” while many women questioned their traditional roles, opting for birth control, getting PhDs, and working outside the home. “The sexual revolution was in full swing on American college campuses” (Shaping 2015). The arts reflected these changes, and on the scene came artists like T-Rex with his feminine clothing; Patti Smith, make-up free and screaming in T-shirts and jeans; and the ultimate musical androgen-ius, David Bowie. Even Bowie’s lyrics told stories of gender issues: “Got your mother in a whirl / ’cause she’s not sure if you’re a boy or a girl” (Bowie 1974). Cult favorites the New York Dolls released their first album featuring the members dressed as sexy Big Apple socialites, and frequently dressed in women’s clothing and makeup during their concerts (The History of Punk n.d.).

With the mid-70s rock and roll scene firmly entrenched in post-modern society, successfully countering conservative, anti-rock criticism, artists began performing music previously reserved for the “opposite” gender. Van Halen performed and recorded Linda Ronstadt’s hit “You’re No Good,” and Tina Turner covered Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love” with at least as much powerful, dripping sexuality as singer Robert Plant. Female rockers like Heart came onto the music scene, equally as talented as their male counterparts. Sexuality and acceptable gender roles were being challenged by these musicians and their audiences, carrying the 60s counterculture into “the now” with political statements that were verbal, visual, and musical.

And in roughly a generation’s time, we went from Little Richard to Glam Rock, also known as Hair Band Music. Male artists from bands like Poison in the 1980s wore teased, dyed hair, flashy make-up, and colorful, skin-tight clothing. They looked like models, moved like strippers, smiled like Hollywood debutantes, and wailed in female vocal registers. The 80s and early 90s also brought us Boy George and Annie Lennox, quickly followed by the queen of edgy sexuality, Madonna. In 1991, Queen’s gay singer Freddie Mercury died from AIDS (Freddie
Mercury 1975), while the timing of Madonna’s success among gay men as well as straight women seemed to move the gay community further into the light of cultural day.

By the mid-90s, all-female and female-fronted bands crashed the scene to protest a mainstream culture that emphasized over-sexualized yet traditionally nurturing femininity. Bands like The Breeders, L7, and Hole vehemently rejected the designs of conservative male-centric culture which postured women as sex objects, and as less intellectual and more “family oriented” than men. In the new millennium, mainstream artists like Taylor Swift and Maroon Five carry the corporate sponsored establishment line of gender binarism, while Hanson and Varsity Fanclub nudge the envelope without transgressing gender boundaries. But artists such as Lady Gaga conspicuously contravene the flawed view of patriarchal society’s heteronormativity, opening a compassionate space for intersexed and LGBTQ people alongside heterosexuals, and proving that music can be an extremely powerful rhetorical medium as well, even though most of these performances are parodic.

**Where We Are Now**

In today’s US culture, we are in no way near wholly accepting of non-heteronormative models, but progressive musicians, their audiences, and PACs like NOW are, for example, actively promoting marriage equality (Rigorous Criteria 2015). Every day, they bring to the forefront social troubles such as bullying, sexual assault, and discrimination against women and LGBTQ people, highlighting the deeply problematic issue of mediated masculinity. They are rapidly exposing the degradation, segregation, and subjugation of all people who have the right to live naturally, safely, and joyfully in their own gender identification. Musicians, too many to number in this presentation, have pushed and continue to push gender and role boundaries, giving us models for performing gender. We hope the conversation does not end until we all live our gender identification that is right for each of us.
References


