



## REVIEW | Gender and Rock

Mary Celeste Kearney

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Providing a multi-levelled map of rock in its broadest conceptualisation through a discernible individual writing style, Kearney creates an extremely thick analysis of the rock scene: at times you can almost hear the music. The author shines a multiperspective, queer light brightly and loudly onto rock culture and the ways in which it has been academically understood. She challenges the patriarchally constructed nature of the genre through her own mix of analysis, exercises and questions. This book, and the voice of the author, acts as both a guide and a friend through rock music, actively contributing to a counter narrative through activities and framing. And as a visual and educational excursion, you cannot help but enjoy the journey.

Kearney approachably situates rock music: its complexities; its production, imagery, emotions, legacy, language; how it is experienced and how it can be explored. Through the insightful interdisciplinary lens of gender, the author successfully sets out the myriad of interconnecting ways that gender has influenced, and continues to influence, rock music. The book's varied approach is not only evident in the theory presented and the diverse locations of study, but is also central to its ethos. This publication, therefore, embodies the nature of its critique and resonates with a desire to engage readers and to create critical rock fans, students and researchers. The book challenges and nuances narratives that have come to dominate academic and fan understandings of the genre by drawing from and highlighting a range of academic perspectives. In doing so, it provides an easy to follow format – organised into four sections – that draws the reader into the theoretical landscapes of cultural studies and the social sciences to consider and contextualise rock. A major strength of this work, therefore, is the bridging of the social sciences and humanities, achieved through its particular clarity and tone. It speaks across disciplines in a clear and visibly political voice, applying theory and constructing an engaging narrative.

As an introductory publication on a well-researched topic, this book provides the reader with a clear and accessible account of the multiple ways, disciplines and theories that have illuminated rock, whilst simultaneously providing a critical (at times reflective) voice that opens out the core practices of rock, inviting the audience in. In terms of form, this book offers an easy to follow pattern of questions, reflections and summaries and leaves the reader feeling empowered to engage with rock. Going beyond the provision of an introductory text for students and researchers new to this issue, Kearney opens a door into rock and – through her accessible examples – questions, challenges and demystifies, encouraging and scaffolding the reader in their own critical considerations.

It is notable that this publication follows and critiques seminal research on gender politics within rock. *Sexing the Groove* (1997) by Sheila Whiteley marked a turning point for the discussion of gender in the music industry, drawing together seminal texts in dialogue and unpacking the representation, conceptualisation and lived experiences of actors in music scenes. It broke with conventions concerning the academic analysis of rock music and opened out dialogue, notably including the embodied experiences of people in the rock industry across genders. As Kearney notes, Whiteley highlighted the enabling ability and social construction of rock as an ever-changing negotiation of gender roles (25). In her own contribution to the field, Kearney updates this discussion, addressing the binary by broadening and queering the music experience, and simultaneously encouraging further critique and expansion through its investment and teaching pedagogy. In critiquing Leonard's *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock, Discourse and Girl Power* (2007), Kearney has demonstrated the need for simultaneous voices to be represented in order to unpack the discourses and discursive processes of rock: the voices of men, women, and (most significantly) beyond this binary, all to be considered in dialogue with one another. Feminist critiques of rock have also gendered the conversation and, once queered as Kearney has drawn out in this work, provided insights into the complexity of the industry. Complexity should therefore be heralded as a positive contributor to creating a more inclusive and emancipatory politics of rock.

Readable and grounded, this publication guides the reader through a myriad of perspectives, spaces, bodies and times. From the foundations of feminist theory to the recording studio, literary theory to zines, this work throws open rock as it wrestles to re-gender and re-frame the genre and our academic analyses. I found the reflexivity from the author particularly encouraging. Not only did an explicit engagement with researcher position contribute to a thicker analysis and deeper understanding of the author's experience, it also provided a useful frame for understanding my own place as an early career feminist scholar and rock lover. This aptly demonstrates the success of this work in addressing multiple (and positionally intersectional) audiences.

Kearney has painted, with clarity, the current environment for rock studies. However, her queering of these narratives could be nuanced further through reflecting upon rock identities in-flux. A brief breakdown of the influence of postmodernist thinking and what this has meant for subcultural theory and ideas of musical identity(ies) would broaden Kearney's focus on rock scenes and subcultures. Post-subcultural theorists (Muggleton et al 2003 and Bennett 1999, for example) have drawn on Maffesoli's (1995) notion of neo-tribalism in order to explore musical communities in a progressively fragmenting, liquid society (Bauman 2013). Considering rock communities through the frame of neo-tribes has the potential to challenge hegemonic, patriarchal structures, with fluidity in all forms offering counter narratives to static unmoving binaries. Such fragmentation can allow for gaps, spaces for subversion and alternative thinking to develop that

challenge patriarchy. Although not aligned to feminist or queer theories, neotribalism has shaken up the restrictions of subcultural theory, going some way to breaking down oppressive fixed perceptions of rockers and offering some movement, freedom and fluidity that can challenge static notions of subcultures, identity and hegemonic structures within music scenes (as demonstrated by Goulding and Shankar 2011; Riley et al 2010; Halfacree and Kitchin 1996). The premise behind neo-tribalism – that we are essentially naturally inclined towards belonging and inclusion into multiple groups – offers a thicker and deeper way to conceptualise rock subcultures. As such, a consideration of post-subcultural theory would add another theoretical string to Kearney's bow.

This aside, the author makes her mark by critiquing the narratives of rock, and by uncovering and highlighting gender in all its guises. She re-genders rock and in doing so exposes its true multi-faceted, colourful self. Rock's powerful queer identity and history which – although understood in inner circles of rock theorists and in the depths of conference papers, articles and queer/feminist academia – has not yet broken into the public domain of the dominant rock listening audience. This book is, therefore, a timely and concise account of the diverse ways in which individuals and groups have engaged with rock and how the genre has consumed patriarchal social discourses. Significantly, it is provided in a form that speaks to both rock scholar and fan. Kearney has embodied rock in this publication; its noisiness, DIY nature, aesthetic and importantly its desire to attract supporters, sympathises, and (critically for us) its researchers and students. It is a valuable, nuanced and grounded exploration of a central issue of debate within rock studies. At a surface level, this publication successfully offers a guiding text for students, yet through Kearney's narrative voice and critique this book simultaneously offers a fascinating pop culture read and a powerful counter narrative of rock past, rock present and (indeed) rock future.

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