Gender Politics in the Music Industry

Catherine Strong

RMIT University

catherine.strong@rmit.edu.au

Sarah Raine

Birmingham City University

sarah.raine@bcu.ac.uk

Abstract

This is the editorial introduction for a special issue of IASPM@Journal entitled Gender Politics in the Music Industry.

KEYWORDS: Popular Music, Gender, Music Industry, Production, Consumption

Introduction

The extreme gender inequality that exists in music making has, at this point, been very well documented. Scholars have for decades examined the ways in which people who identify as women are marginalized, including through: lack of access to spaces associated with music (Björck 2013); sexist attitudes, including assumptions that they cannot use instruments or technology (Clawson 1999); the existence of a 'boys club' that makes it hard for women to access information and networks (Leonard 2016: 40); and through mechanisms of taste-making and archiving that create cannons and histories that focus on men (Reddington 2007; Strong 2011; Schmutz and Faulpel 2010). Ethnographic, audience, and scene- and location-based research has documented exclusionary practices and interrogated the way women are particularly under-represented as performers in genres such as electronic music (see Gadir 2017; Farrugia 2012) and heavy metal (see Hill 2016). Recently, however, data have begun to appear that approach this issue of inequality through a more industry-based perspective. This data – emerging out of industry reports or media articles in addition to academic works – shows that people identifying as women are earning less in royalties (Strong and Cannizzo 2017), are played less on radio (McCormack 2015), are under-represented in the charts

(Lafrance et al 2011), are de-emphasized in Spotify playlists (Pelly 2018), are more likely to have shorter careers (Lieb 2013), and occupy few key decision-making positions in the industry (McCormack 2015). Research looking at the relationship between education and gendered outcomes in industry has contributed an extra dimension to this work, particularly by showing how structural issues in education and education policies have an impact on who ends up with the skills to succeed in these industries (de Boise 2017; Born and Devine 2015). However, there is still more work to be done in this area.

In order to understand how gender inequality persists in the music industry, it needs to be placed in the context of changing work conditions and the rise of the creative industries as a framework through which artistic work is often viewed. The label creative industries has become a catch-all term for fields such as music, film, television, visual art, creative writing and, in some cases, IT and advertising (as in the UK's Cultural and Creative Industries framework). While the reframing of creative activities as central to economic prosperity in many countries has increased the perception of their worth in various ways, this also reflects a neoliberal approach that uses economic value as the main way to judge the worth of an activity, and which puts the individual at the centre of discussion (Gill et al. 2017). This focus on the individual has consequences for how creative workers can confront inequality. Cultural workers often strongly buy in to the notion of the existence of a meritocracy which supposedly ensures the success of the most talented and hardworking people regardless of their identity (Strong and Cannizzo 2017: vi). This works in combination with a postfeminist sensibility (Gill et al. 2017) that positions feminist goals as obsolete to de-emphasize structural approaches to gender inequality (see also McRobbie 2008). So, while the creative industries as a whole have a reputation for being liberal and tolerant, this has not translated into greater actual inclusivity. Furthermore, a strong belief in the perceived fairness of these industries may prevent closer interrogations of whether this is actually the case, especially by those holding privileged positions in the system (Taylor and O'Brien 2017). The precarious nature of work and the so-called gig economy that is typical in creative industries (and becoming more common in all areas of work) also leads to disadvantageous gendered outcomes. Risk is transferred to workers and any characteristics or circumstances that prevent a worker from being endlessly flexible and responsive to the requirements of the market can easily derail a career (Gill 2002; Gill et al. 2017; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2015). Greater caring responsibilities and a lack of access to the masculine subjectivities (as explored by Miller 2016) necessary to succeed in such an environment make women more vulnerable than their male counterparts.

These then are some of the defining characteristics of the music industry environment that the articles in this special edition attempt to engage with and provide greater understanding of. Leonard (2016: 37) has noted that while there has been a strong focus on performers in popular music studies, "relatively little attention has been given to how gender structures the experiences of those within other areas of employment in the music industries". This issue of IASPM@Journal does include papers on performers and their place in these industries, but it also examines industry personnel such as venue owners, producers, festival promoters and employees at major labels on an attempt to broaden our understanding of where people who identify as women sit in these structures. While for the most part the papers in this issue remain within a binary gendered framework – partly because this is still the dominant way of understanding gender within the industries under examination – a number make more expansive or intersectional contributions, or consider how more inclusive approaches are starting to make an impact.

This issue begins with Kara Attreps' contribution to jazz and blues research which refocuses considerations of place through a critical engagement with the use of archival methods and musical labour. Through a political economy frame and a lens of intersectional discourse, Attrep examines the labour of female slaves, the female proprietors of juke joints and the later lawn parties, and finally the female owners of jazz clubs, focusing in particular on the life and work of Ada "Bricktop" Smith. In this article, the author highlights the gendered nature of extant narratives concerning the history of jazz and blues. In doing so, she demonstrates a historic gender bias relating to those who are associated with the production of the music: specifically, male musicians and male proprietors of larger venues. In order to draw attention to this hidden history of work in the production and consumption of jazz and blues, Attrep works to weave together a range of archival sources. She demonstrates through several detailed and linked case studies the contribution that feminist work and gender analysis can make in pushing forward our understanding of music histories and political economies by addressing gaps, in particular within music genres that remain dominated by a masculine history. This reminder that women have always played essential roles in music, but most often behind the scenes, is an important new contribution to scholarship that reclaims a role in the development of popular music as we know it today.

Continuing the focus on these behind the scenes roles, Toby Bennett's article provides an analysis of industry discourses on gender inequality, using material from the trade press and interviews with industry personnel acting backstage. Bennett identifies four main themes in these materials which point to complex and sometimes contradictory debates within the industry. First, he discusses how the nature of work emerges as a complicating factor in issues relating to equality, with the structure of the music industry and its implication in the difficulties in collectively moving towards equality noted. Secondly, debates emerged in the materials examined around what inequality actually was, and the best ways of trying to combat it. This included questions about positive discrimination and how approaches to inequality might move beyond a simple focus on binary gender. Next, Bennett draws out the theme of intergenerational justice, which became particularly apparent in situations where younger women's expression of sexuality was criticized by older figures in the industry. This theme has echoes of conflicts between different generations of feminists that emerge from time to time. The final theme discussed in this paper involves epistemic injustice, a term relating to issues around who is able to know what when it comes to what happens in the music industries. Bennett shows that a more nuanced understanding of how narratives around equality are constructed within the industry and between its workers is vital to finding effective ways forward.

The issue of gender within jazz is further considered in relation to the representation of women at jazz festivals in Sweden and the US by Cecilia Björck and Esa Bergman. This article includes perspectives from a number of different areas of the industry, including organisers, cultural agencies and activists as well as the artists involved in the festivals. Complementing the piece by Kara Attrep, this article provides a concise outline of the issues experienced by women in jazz and explores in detail the gendered narratives that have come to dominate popular and academic expectations of the genre. Emerging out of a project that aims to further gender-equal jazz scenes in both Sweden and the US, this article reports on and analyses the findings through a particular focus on resistance, as informed by a poststructural approach to discourse. However, as the authors note, in aiming to increase visibility of female musicians and composers in jazz, this project received unexpected

resistance on the part of the female musicians and composers in Sweden, explored by Björck and Bergman as a resistance to the term "women in jazz". The authors link this into similar discourses in other music scenes and consider this in relation to two different political contexts of the US and Sweden. Furthermore, they note that generational differences are narrated by younger members through a "discourse of diversity" (54). They end by highlighting the complexity of the discursive fields within which such initiatives take place and call for a more intersectional and considered approaches to addressing gender equality and visibility.

Moving into the recording studio, in her article Helen Reddington considers the relationship between the producer and the producee via the concept of ventriloquism. As men have made up the vast majority of producers in the past, as well as a large proportion of music composers, it can be said that women's voices have often been filtered through the male ear, or in some cases women's performances have been controlled and dominated by the men in control of the processes of recording. Using accounts from women producers and engineers, Reddington examines how this dynamic might be changing as more women enter studio spaces. She asks whether producers do speak through the voices of those they record, and if so whether there are different outcomes when women record men than when men record women. By asking women about their processes in this regard, Reddington uncovers a number of different practices by her respondents. These range from some that very closely resemble what we usually think of as ventriloquism – with women producers literally putting words into male mouths (or not allowing some words) – to situations where a more collaborative approach is taken but where something of the women's social and aesthetic values become part of the male performance, through to women who saw themselves as simply capturing a performance and aiming to intervene as little as possible as producers. Reddington's respondents saw new sonic possibilities arising from the ways they went about recording men, but also from potentially different approaches to recording other women, approaches which focus more on authenticity in the performance being captured than an imposition of ideas on the person being recorded by the producer. This involves a rethinking of power relations in the studio.

A consideration of music festivals is continued in Cecile Navarro's article on Urban Women Week, a Senegalese festival which aims to promote women in hip hop. Building upon an ethnographic study of the rap music scene in Senegal and feminist approaches that consider festivals as a potential site for community building, Navarro provides a detailed case study of this initiative in relation to glocal gender politics. Through an examination of the intersections between culture, religion, music, and global gender initiatives, this article reflects upon the experience of female hip hop musicians in a music scene that remains staunchly dominated by men and situated within patriarchal definitions and expectations. Through this frame, the Urban Women Week event, the work and narratives of the organizational team, and the experiences of women involved are considered. Concluding her findings, Navarro highlights how the gender agenda articulated through Urban Women Week remains compatible within a Senegalese context and provides a supportive platform for female rap artists, yet prevents any radical subversion of patriarchy, both in terms of the music scene and wider society.

The issue concludes with two empirical papers that focus on women's experiences making music. Charity Marsh explores the role of community-based arts projects in challenging gendered power dynamics within the music industry by promoting supportive spaces, strong role models, and connections between girl and female-identified professionals. Through the detailed case study of Girls Rock

Regina in Saskatchewan, Canada, Marsh adds the voices of the women and campers involved in this initiative to an emerging area of research. Through an analysis of participant voice contextualized by researcher observation and engagement, these narratives are shown to challenge dominant gendered notions of music technologies, creativity, and the music industry more widely, and are nurtured through the provision of female role models and skill and knowledge development within a collective and supportive feminist music space. In considering impact on the girls and women involved, Marsh frames girl music camps such as Girls Rock Regina as feminist interventions (building on the work of popular music and feminist scholars), the contributions of which are yet to be fully realized within the wider context of the music industry.

Finally, Caroline O'Sullivan presents an empirical study looking at change over time in the dance and indie scenes in Dublin, comparing the trajectories of men and women. She argues that while the early- to mid-2000s saw an increase in women's involvement in these scenes, their participation has dropped off since this time. In particular, she notes that the men in her study are more likely to have continued on as musicians, whereas the women were more likely to quit. She connects this to a number of factors, including male gatekeeping around technology that sees women's ways of interacting with technology devalued, women's caring and career responsibilities leading to a withdrawal from music making, and an overall discouraging attitude from men they interacted with in the scene. She also notes the tensions between the aspects of performance that brought women enjoyment and were central to the social experience associated with it for them. In particular, this involves dressing up together in preparation for a gig and the negative way this could be framed by others, for example through a focus on their appearance rather than their skills as musicians or DJs. An important point to note arising from this piece is that improvements in gender equality do not necessarily become permanent; changing circumstances can result in women's representation decreasing over time where efforts are not made to ensure this does not happen, and Dublin is a good example of this.

The response to this special issue CfP demonstrated that gender politics in the music industry is a vibrant and developing area of research. The articles published here in IASPM@Journal bring to the fore issues of gendered discourses and practices in both the music industry and the ways in which scholars have attempted to understand these experiences. This special issue seeks to contribute to this expanding body of work by offering new insight into the issues experienced and strategies employed by individuals and organisations in Europe, North America, and Africa that are engaged in the production and consumption of music within this context of inequality. In particular, these articles move towards an intersectional approach to popular music research and in considering gender politics more specifically. In doing so they offer new insights and useful frames through which to view this topic. Further work is required in this area, however. We also look forward to work that examines the effect of the #metoo movement that emerged in 2017, which called attention to the ways in which abuse has been part of the creative industries, including in music. Whether this offers new ways of framing the discourse around equality in this area remains to be seen, but the continued interrogation of what goes on behind the scenes – as offered by many of the papers in this issue – will, we hope, make bringing about a positive change easier.

References

Armstrong, V., 2011. *Technology and the Gendering of Music Education*, Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Björck, C., 2013. A Music Room of One's Own: Discursive Constructions of Girls-only Spaces for Learning Popular Music. *Girlhood Studies* 6(2): 11-29. https://doi.org/10.3167/ghs.2013.060203

Born, G. and Devine, K., 2015. 'Music Technology, Gender, and Class: Digitization, Educational and Social Change in Britain', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 12(2): 135-172. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572215000018

Clawson, M. A., 1999. When Women Play the Bass: Instrument Specialization and Gender Interpretation in Alternative Rock Music. *Gender & Society* 13(2): 193-210.

De Boise, S., 2017. Gender Inequalities in Higher Music Education: Comparing the UK and Sweden. *British Journal of Music Education* 35 (1):23-41. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265051717000134

Farrugia, R., 2012. *Beyond the Dancefloor: Female DJs, Technology and Electronic Dance Music.* Bristol: Intellect.

Gadir, T., 2017. 'Forty-Seven DJs, Four Women: Meritocracy, talent and postfeminist politics', *Dancecult*, 9 (1):50–72. http://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2017.09.01.03

Gill, R., 2002. 'Cool, creative and Egalitarian? Exploring gender in project-based new media work in Europe', *Information, Communication and Society*, 5(1): 70-89.

Gill, R., Kelan, E.K. and Scharff, C.M., 2017 A postfeminist sensibility at work. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 24 (3): 226-244.

Hesmondhalgh, D. and Baker, S., 2015. Sex, gender and work segregation in the cultural industries. *The Sociological Review*, 63 (S1): 23-36. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12238

Hill, R., 2016. *Gender, Metal and the Media: Women Fans and the Gendered Experience of Music.* London: Palgrave.

Lafrace, M., Worcester, L. and Burns, L., 2011. Gender and the Billboard Top 40 Charts between 1997 and 2007. *Popular Music and Society* 34(5): 557-570. https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2010.522827

Leonard, M., 2016. Girls at work: gendered identities, sex segregation and employment experiences in the music industries. In J. Warwick and A. Adrian (eds.), *Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music: Performance, Authority, Authenticity.* New York: Routledge: 37–55.

Pelly, L., 2018 Discover Weakly: Sexism on Spotify. *The Baffler* https://thebaffler.com/latest/discover-weakly-pelly

McCormack, A., 2017. 'By the Numbers: The Gender Gap in the Australian Music Industry.' Triple J Hack. http://www.abc.net.au/triplej/programs/hack/by-the-numbers-the-gender-gap-in-the-australian-music-industry/8328952

McRobbie, A.-
2008. The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change. London: Sage.
2009. 'Reflections on Feminism, Immaterial Labour and the Post-Fordist Regime', New Formations 70: 60-76. https://doi.org/10.3898/NEWF.70.04.2010

Miller, D.K., 2016. Gender and the artist archetype: understanding gender inequality in artistic careers. *Sociology Compass* 10 (2): 119-131. . https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12350

Music Victoria, 2015. Women in the Victorian Contemporary Music Industry.
    Melbourne: Music Victoria.

Reddington, H., 2007. *The Lost Women of Rock Music*. Sheffield: Equinox.

Schmutz, V. and Faulpel, A., 2010. Gender and Cultural Consecration in Popular
    Music. *Social Forces* 89 (2): 685-707.

Strong, C., 2011. Grunge, Riot Grrrl and the Forgetting of Women in Rock.
    Popular Communication 44 (2): 398-416. . https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-
    5931.2011.00839.x

Strong, C. and Cannizzo, F., 2017. *Australian Women Screen Composers: Career
    Barriers and Pathways: Research Report*, Melbourne, Australia: RMIT
    University. http://apraamcos.com.au/about-us/industry-research/australian-
    women-screen-composers/ Accessed: 22 January 2222.

Taylor, M. and O'Brien, D., 2017. 'Culture is a Meritocracy': Why Creative
    Workers' Attitudes may Reinforce Social Inequality. *Sociological Research
    Online* 22 (4): 27-47. https://doi.org/10.1177/1360780417726732