



# REVIEW | Voicing Girlhood in Popular Music: Performance, Authority, Authenticity

Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian Eds.

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This collection of essays has been brought together on the premise that there is a category within popular music that relates specifically to girlhood, as distinct from womanhood. Popular music studies have generally deployed an adult-centred mode in the analysis of various musics, but it is noted in the editorial introduction that girls – as distinct from women – have had a great enough impact upon the terrain of popular music to merit a volume of criticism devoted to their particular experiences and influence (2). Girlhood is framed as an active mode of distinct female experience by the editing duo of Jacqueline Warwick and Allison Adrian. Their introductory essay promises an academic rigor that is pursued to lesser and greater degrees in the subsequent essays. Perhaps, however, the intention here was not to create an academic piece as much as to provide a holistic sense of the terrain of girlhood within popular music, and the editorial brief seems to have been to bring an inter-disciplinary focus to the subject. The advantage for the reader is a sense of new expression across a whole range of girls' experiences in popular music.

To the extent that the editors mention their intention to create an intersectional collection, this literature nonetheless doesn't veer far from much of what has been written often enough about girl groups and girls in bands, not least recent writing by artists like Kim Gordon (Gordon 2015) and Viv Albertine (Albertine 2014). As a songwriter/performer and researcher engaged within these debates, I was aware of some gaps in the overarching narrative around gender non-conformity and gender fluidity, generally. We are living in a time in which gender politics within music scenes are breaking down in new ways that are significant for feminist discourse,

with artists like Anohni transitioning in public, and I felt the volume sidestepped those issues to some extent. Nonetheless, it is a compendium of thought about girls in popular music that is framed anew, and valuable for that reason alone. The editors assert voice and identity as key motifs within a study of girlhood in popular music, and these touchstones provide a context for the division of the volume into three parts, dedicated to agency, vocality and authenticity.

The emergence of girl studies after the third wave of feminism can be described as a method proposition undertaken in order to engage with the finer grain of broader female histories relating to identity in women's studies. By implication, therefore, this study constitutes a reclamation of the term girl, conventionally understood as diminishing nomenclature when applied to women. The logic of girl studies seems to be that centring the girl within their own study provides feminist critique with a more complex, layered sense of stages of womanhood, each with their different values and influence. The volume certainly examines those who create music, those who express agency through fandom, and those working in the music industry and provides a rich source or overview of those experiences. Whether the discussion is through the prism of an exploration of so-called girl bands and girl groups, or a study of the female voice in pop and its critical affect, one comes to gain a sense of the possibilities and limitations of the space that is girlhood.

Whilst centring the girl in popular music is a difficult position to argue against, I did find myself blanching at various times at the use of the word girl applied to grown women who were making music or taking various actions in music scenes. The repurposing of negative names has a great history within feminist discourse yet the use of the term girl to describe women beyond twenty remains a slight in various contexts and can be jarring, even within this book. An example is Lucy O'Brien's use of the terms girl bands and girl gangs in the opening essay of the volume, "I'm With The Band". Whilst the content of the essay is interesting enough, the unmediated terminology here is irksome when one knows, as I do, that the terms are quite rightly contested in literature including in Lisa Mackinney's excellent critique of the term girl groups in her doctoral research work, related to *The Shangri-Las* (MacKinney 2012).

Other chapters, like Alexandra Appolono's "Authority, Ability and The Aging Ingenue's Voice" positions the girl as a liminal character, acting between the grown up and the childlike, a mode (it is argued) that persists in voice. It is an interesting and important idea, yet to describe Joni Mitchell and Kathleen Hanna as girls within the narrative of their career trajectories seems something of a stretch. Appolono's contention that Hanna's voice has a "stereotypically girlish" (158) tone and timbre is an example of how this type of assertion cuts both ways in a feminist analysis – what we seek to outline as a critique can also come to entrap us as women and artists. To infantilise the voice that is natural may be the very problem this author sought to circumvent.

Sarah Dougher's "When Loud Meets Real" further examines ideas of voice through volume, silencing and agency in the voices of girls at rock camps. "To rock" in this context is, for very young girls, to simply "be awesome" (195). Conversely, to not have agency is to be silenced. This setting up of a rock/pop binary in relation to volume, and the way these ideas of value foreshadow the relative goodness and badness of these so-called genres in broader contexts of contemporary music are – like ideas of girlie voices – similarly contestable propositions. Through many of these pieces I found at times an air of nostalgia, and sometimes a theorizing that

had not absorbed the spoils of, for example, Judith Butler's seminal work, *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990).

"YouTube, Twerking and You" was one of the most thought provoking essays in the collection. Kyra D. Gaunt evokes a world of girl empowerment expressed as dance and display through a complex and richly historical analysis of twerking broadcast, a world which, as Gaunt points out, is deeply problematic due to the decontextualizing and non-black mediation that has made twerking mainstream. It is incredibly important to have this cogent interruption to the well-worn narrative of sexy black girls in music clips as a consumer trope of contemporary music.

Reading this volume, one becomes attuned once more to the depth and breadth of the problems women face as they are side-lined in professional music scenes, and how these issues can be more extreme for girls, those who have not yet legally become adults. The fraught complexity of the reception of music made by women is tangible through this collection; it seems the very sound and presence of the female artist can present a problem to male dominated music scenes and industries. That these issues continue to confront us in their complexity – including, of course, how they intersect with issues of race and class – is apparent even in this review. Ultimately, this collection offers the opportunity to consider the voice of the girl in popular music, whomever she may be. Even the most empowered women in music were once young girls who sought to raise their voices in expression and who sometimes struggled to be heard. This collection reinforces the need to listen to those girls carefully.

## References

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