

Breaking Barriers and Facing Stereotypes: A Comprehensive Study in Rock & Metal

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Abstract. This research paper explores the enduring issue of sexism in rock and heavy metal music, revealing the layers of misogyny and gender bias despite these genres' rebellion against social norms. It discusses the historical context, cultural influences, and social expectations that have perpetuated women's struggle for recognition and respect in male-dominated spaces. The paper highlights how women often had to downplay their gender to gain recognition for their musical talents and addresses gender cancellation, where women had to become 'one of the guys' to be taken seriously. It also exposes the objectification of women in lyrics, album covers, and media representation, emphasizing the commodification of the female body. Additionally, it discusses the challenges of promoting female artists without unintentionally excluding them. Overall, the paper underscores the urgent need to challenge deep-rooted gender biases and redefine the narrative surrounding women in these music genres.

Keywords. Sexism in Music, Gender Stereotypes in Rock and Metal, Female Musicians, Feminism in Rock and Metal Music, Music Industry Objectification.

1. Introduction

The rock and heavy metal music industry is one of the most aggressive and misogynistic places for a woman to be a part of. "The enterprise is almost exclusively male, the majority of listeners are male, and even though women singers contributed in the early 1960s, there have been only a few female performers" (HARDING and NETT, 1984, p. 60). Even within this masculine environment, feminine representation in music lyrics, but especially on album covers in the field, is numerous, as will be discussed later in this article. A few women entered the space, and the numbers started to increase because women began to find their voice in rock and metal, even when questioned about their place in the scene:

"Belting out deep but high notes to shredding guitars and double bass drumming was usually done by a man. With testosterone flying high and the aggressiveness of the music, a metal concert was no place for a lady, or so many thought..." (KIRTLAND, 2014, p. 09).

Not a safe space for a "lady" because we are not "aggressive enough". Therefore, the definition of spaces like these is characterised by "aggressiveness," and by its definition, not permitted, not a space for a lady. "Studies have found that women are portrayed as stereotypically passive,

in roles discrepant with reality, and as devalued and invisible. The findings of Harding and Nett (1984), have been derived from research into various media, including film (Wolfenstein and Leites, 1960; Matthews-Klein, 1979), art (Hess and Nochlin, 1972), television (Courtney and Whipple, 1974; McNeil, 1975), literature (Cornillon, 1972; Deegan, 1952), and magazine fiction and advertising (Flora, 1971; Miliun, 1975; Wilson, 1977). Thus far, women's representations in popular music have been examined in a very limited way" (p. 60).

When talking about the performance that involves the development of numerous skills from the range of mastery of musical notation to instrumental technique, Domenici (2013) shows that the men were in charge of this area and women were supposed to learn the "keyboard as a form of unpretentious domestic entertainment, as they were forbidden to develop their talents so as not to compete with their husbands in the eyes of others" (p. 89-90).

Society dictated "what" and "how" women should behave without becoming a threat to their husbands' image. Not only in films, arts, literature, television, magazine fiction, songs, but also historically, women have always been dominated by men, placed in a position of being merely objects. The mother, the wife, the mistress, but then women started to go on stage, and a new side of these women was seen. Debbie Harry, talks about in the

documentary *Blondie's New York and the Making of Parallel Lines*: "They expected me to build a family and be the woman, be the wife, and they blame me for not being good at it" (HARRY, 2014).

Bands with women in their lineup, "face three 'dualities' when being part in metal: 'whore/goddess,' in which they must prove their knowledge of metal to be seen as a 'worthy' fan; 'acting male/looking female,' where they need to get the balance of performance right; a 'twilight zone' in which they are not masculine enough to be accepted in metal nor feminine enough to be accepted in the mainstream" (HILL, 2016, p. 35). Thus, a delicate line was established between not being "masculine enough" for metal and not being "feminine enough" for the mainstream. In this article, we will be discussing these topics: gender cancellation, sexualization (videos, photos), and the representation of women in media (magazines and album covers).

2. Gender Cancellation

We embarked on our journey initially referred to as "groupies." In the Rock and Metal scene, this realm is characterised by its domination by virtuoso men on stage, while in the audience, women are often perceived as "fans willing to serve their idols."

We might 'all be groupies sometimes' but where women are concerned, that's all too often meant literally, translating as 'we're really all just sluts.' It's best to keep in mind Sheryl Garratt's warning that 'the term groupie is a dangerous one, for it is often used as a putdown for any women involved in the industry.' Until the word 'groupie' has stopped being a shorthand term for women involved in Rock & Roll, and until it's taken for granted that girl fans, women musicians, and female photographers, publicists, recording engineers and journalists come to Rock & Roll for the same reasons as their male counterparts, it's well to keep a sharp watch on how the word 'groupie' is bandied about. (LEWIS, 1992, p.83).

Many women who sought to be taken seriously as musicians had to downplay or even conceal their gender in order to be recognized for their job, skill, and talent rather than being pigeonholed based on their gender. This strategy involved adopting masculine appearances, behaviours, and even names to fit into the male-dominated environment. By presenting themselves as "one of the guys," these women aimed to challenge stereotypes and gain acceptance within the music community, highlighting the lengths they had to go to simply to be considered equals in a space traditionally reserved for men. This illustrates the depth of the gender biases and expectations that have historically existed within the rock and metal genres.

This was reinforced by incidents like those involving Sean Yseult, the former bassist of the band *White Zombie*. She mentions that she got tired of receiving

visits from both women and men in her dressing room, who believed they would find a man, not a woman (STAGGS, 2010). Even with these events, she recalls that "the local crew or stage assistants treated me like crap and tried to kick me out of my own backstage, assuming I didn't belong there since I was a girl. But the fans and the bands we played with always accepted me as one of the guys, which I loved" (BLABBERMOUTH.NET, 2010).

Sean Yseult had to hide her gender and present herself as a skillful musician to be taken seriously in the male-dominated music scene. Angela Gossow, the former singer of *Arch Enemy*, also concealed her identity as a woman when she joined the band, as both women aimed to avoid gender-based rejection from listeners and establish their place in the music industry. Therefore, the fans would listen to the song without knowing that the vocalist was a woman, so the band understood, after releasing the single and having the public hear it without the knowledge of the "body that generates the voice," that "they couldn't backtrack and withdraw the approval they had given before."

This shows that the comparison between male and female musicians goes beyond the body. After the "acceptance," we started to receive and became accustomed to answering questions and hearing comments like: "You play guitar like that male guitarist from that band," "Wow, for a girl, you play like a man." We then question ourselves, of course, rhetorically, but importantly: "Would you comment, or even dare to say things like that to a man?" The answer, as we know, is no.

The singer of the band *Evanescence*, Amy Lee, tells the story of the launch of the single and album that brought the band the recognition they deserved. The record label would only allow the launch after the vocalist, Paul McCoy, recorded some vocal lines in the original song, "Bring Me to Life," since the record label thought that the song started with a woman singing and a piano, and the listeners needed something "familiar." In other words, the band would only be heard with a man in command of the vocals. If the situation were the opposite, would the label say they needed the "familiarity" of a woman in order to sell the song? According to what Amy told the interviewer,

Honestly, women are overlooked. We are left out. It's harder to succeed in the media or on the radio because our face isn't the classic and quintessential face of rock... if you're thinking of it as a literal face. I think it's subconsciously rooted in our brains that women in rock are somehow less authentic, as if we're the next generation. We're part 2. Not the original. A small, unbranded niche. (REIS, 2020).

Female musicians frequently face the need to prove themselves and overcome numerous barriers. They are pressured to hide weaknesses, suppress emotions, endure oppression, and conform to traditional gender roles while maintaining politeness and organisation. When women are seen

as not fitting the traditional feminine image, they often feel compelled to distance themselves from this stereotype. As a result, they aim to embody a balanced blend of masculine and feminine qualities, hoping that their music will finally receive the recognition and respect it deserves, allowing them to establish their place among rock stars.

3. Sexualization

With the concept of gender cancellation came the movement to commodify women's bodies and relegate the music to the background. Consequently, various symbols have become associated not only with specific musical styles but also with the choice of musical instruments. In the realm of Rock and Metal, it is more customary to encounter women as vocalists rather than instrumentalists. Instruments such as the guitar and the electric bass have been traditionally linked to masculine practice. When it comes to women who pursue drumming, this symbolism becomes even more intricate, as there is often an assumption that drummers require physical strength and testosterone—implying that drums may not be suitable for the "weaker sex." In the context of 'Extreme Metal,' female vocalists who employ guttural vocals, diverging from the conventional image of a "feminine" vocalist, often face reluctance from the audience. Conversely, female vocalists who sing in what is considered a "feminine voice" are burdened with the expectation of portraying themselves as "feminine," frequently pressured to convey a "sensual" image akin to a "Disney princess of darkness." As a result, producers and record labels introduced a new category for bands, often referred to as "female-fronted," which Angela aptly describes in the book "Not Just Tits in a Corset."

These days it's the other way around; a band will use their female singer as a strong promotional tool. They bang out pictures where she's showing off what she's got or whatever- show she's very pretty - and then they post the music, and I think this is dangerous because then the band will be judged by the image and look of the girl."(KIRTLAND, 2014, p.24).

Angela's intent behind the statement "Bands use the image of women as a marketing tool" is to highlight that many bands initially enter the industry not by garnering attention for their music, but rather by emphasising their frontwoman. In other words, they do not amass fans and an audience based on musical quality but rather rely on the physical appearance of the musician, whether she serves as a vocalist, guitarist, or drummer. While being a musician inherently places one in the spotlight, when the female body becomes the "face of the music," it can lead to a misinterpretation of the intended message and how others perceive the band.

3.1 Promotional photos

When we discuss the "female fronted" niche, it is not a genre, nor is it a style. Rather, it is something

created with the aim of providing opportunities for bands with women in their lineups to participate in festivals and receive airplay. However, it has also given rise to a misconception about a musical style that does not truly exist. Bands like Epica, Nightwish, Xandria, and many others are labelled as "female fronted" because they feature women in their lineups, but they have an actual genre. Moreover, this term carries a connotation similar to that of the word "groupie"; it can sound derogatory when used to describe a band, implying that it's a feminine or lightweight group.

Furthermore, the promotion of these so-called "female fronted bands" often takes on a sensual tone, consistently highlighting and idealising the female body as the epitome of perfection. In Jill Kirtland's book celebrating women in metal (2014), we encounter Charlotte Wessels, the former vocalist of the Dutch band Delain. Charlotte reveals that her producer suggested she pose naked in the official photoshoot for the band's upcoming album, using pure pressure and coercion to obtain her consent. Otherwise, he informed her that if she refused to pose nude, there would be no promotional photos taken at all (p. 78). When she saw the resulting pictures, she came to the realisation that her body did not align with the image presented. According to the singer,

"I shaved part of my head. That was kind of my rebellion. I didn't tell them before I went into the photo shoot that I wanted as many pictures as possible without my hair because I knew that they would hate that, and I really just felt so annoyed with the whole thing that I just wanted to get away from the whole super feminine. Then we got the photos back and I was looking at the photos, I was looking at my legs and I just thought, 'That's not my legs. My legs are twice the size'. So I called them and I said, 'Did you Photoshop me to look thinner than I am?' And he said, 'Yea, of course, but everyone wants to be thin'. And I said, 'Whoa, I don't want that'. ." (KIRTLAND, 2014, p.78)

Producers, magazines, album covers, and social media worldwide convey a misleading message to young girls, as well as to adult women. They imply that this idealised image or body is what they should strive to achieve or possess. Women in Rock and Metal, whether they intend to or not, serve as role models, and even the slightest influence one person has on another can carry a significant weight. It is a substantial responsibility to impose such standards on a world that observes and imitates, as well as on those who set the trends themselves. One must consider the effects of their actions and how they might impact others.

3.2 Videos

In addition to enduring pressure from labels and producers to manipulate and exploit the image of female frontwomen to their liking, Dias (2019) observed a significant event in 1981 that influenced the entire history of popular music, particularly the

1980s: the introduction of MTV, a television channel that continuously aired music videos and musical content (p. 27). This development proved fundamental for the music industry, as it facilitated the widespread dissemination of songs and conveyed new messages to the public. However, within the heavy metal genre, MTV's influence served to reinforce its patriarchal discourse, which was closely linked to the image of masculinity associated with male rockers. Some music videos relied on stereotypical representations of women, creating contrasting narratives for masculinity and femininity. In these cases, women were portrayed not as equals but as objects of sexual desire for male viewers.

Reproducing coded images of the female body, conventionally positioning girls and women as objects of male voyeurism, are effective strategies for associating male adolescent desire and male dominance. Representations of females are inflected in ways that facilitate their integration into the specific vision of male adolescent discourse. Girls, when they appear, are not represented as equal participants in the symbolic system of the street, but function instead to delineate male adolescent discourse. (LEWIS, 1993, p. 117)

Typically, these videos featured camera close-ups of exposed legs, buttocks, cleavage, and provocative poses, often depicted in tight or transparent clothing. This trend can be observed in music videos such as "Hot for Teacher" by Van Halen (1984), "It's So Easy" by Guns N' Roses (1987), and "Girls Girls Girls" by Mötley Crüe (1987), among many others. The notion of presenting women as sexually available beings may seem morally objectionable, but the sheer volume of such videos being produced only served to reinforce the acceptability of this portrayal. Instead of adhering to its tradition of rebellion and rule-breaking, rock and metal, as a part of the broader social order, perpetuated the objectification of women, relinquishing its potential to challenge established norms.

4. Representation in lyrics, cover albums and magazines

Not only were the videos utilising the female image, but the lyrics also played with the minds and fantasies of men. From classical tunes with mermaids luring sailors to their deaths, to country and western tunes with wives and their cheating hearts, women and the roles they play, or are expected to play, in society have been characterised by men. This is no more true than in rock music which has been affectionately described by those in the industry as "kicking ass" and which is probably the most blatantly misogynistic and aggressive form of music currently listened to. (HARDING and NETT, 1984, p.60).

Just like nicknames, archetypes can serve as useful organisational tools. However, they often end up oversimplifying more intricate ideas about the

feminine image, eroticizing them to the point where they appear harmless. For instance, consider how many bands have achieved fame and fortune at the expense of the image of the Blood Countess, Elizabeth Báthory. In reality, she was a cold and cruel murderer, yet history has chosen to provide her with a more appealing archetype—one that filmmakers, writers, and musicians could exploit to their advantage. Nowadays, the Blood Countess is perceived as a sexy vampire who bathed in the blood of virgins, which is untrue, as explained by author Tori Telfer (2019), the truth is that by associating the image of women with monsters, vampires, sorceresses, and animals, this image becomes even more sexualized and, paradoxically, more innocent because women are portrayed as prey (p.17).

In addition to the lyrics, famous album cover art for rock bands further sexualizes the female body. This eroticization is even more pronounced in metal album covers, but the use of the female body in rock album covers is quite diverse. Album covers in rock music, such as Scorpions' "Lovedrive" (1979) and Nazareth's "The Catch" (1984), often employ sexual appeals using the female body. Even when we delve deeper into some covers, like Scorpions' "Virgin Killer" from 1976, we see a young girl in a sensual, semi-nude pose. One might interpret this as a critique or a subversion of the system, but it's often challenging to find straightforward explanations for such choices.

On covers like Sugar Ray's "Lemonade and Brownies" (1995) and the Brazilian band Jota Quest's "Funky Funky Boom Boom" (2013), women are depicted as appetisers and snacks. Other rock and hard rock bands also use the image of masculinity to assert superiority over femininity, as seen in covers like KISS's "Love Gun" (1977) and Manowar's "Blow Your Speakers" (1987), where they display and idolise the muscular male body with submissive women vying for their masculinity. More examples of the sexualization of women's bodies can be found in albums like Steel Panther's "Balls Out" (2011), Meat Loaf's "Bad Attitude" (1984), and, to conclude the rock section, "The Tung Bandits" (1990), where a naked woman is depicted on the cover, with an open mouth and tongue out, sitting on a tongue with a pleasurable expression. In "Spinal Tap, Bitch School" (1992), one might argue for subversion, suggesting that she is there by choice and enjoys sadomasochism, but it's straightforward: a woman in latex clothing, a graduation cap, on all fours, being dominated.

Transitioning from rock to metal, we often see women tormented by demons, depicted naked, surrounded by men, as seen in the covers of Witchfinder General's "Death Penalty" (1982), Belphegor's "Lucifer Incestus" (2003), and Cradle of Filth's "Hammer of the Witches" (2015), all of which contain one or more elements mentioned. In other covers, such as Being Killed's "Massacre of the Living" (2008), we witness a woman being assaulted and violated by zombies. In Cannibal Corpse's

"Butchered at Birth" (1991), it's intriguing because the skeletons are tearing apart another, but the only one identifiable as female is the skeleton being torn apart that still has a face. In Cryfermal's album "Silva Nigra" (2009), we see a man being served in every sense by a woman, and to make it fitting, she even has a tray on her back, portraying him exactly as he wishes and believes he should be treated.

It is important to address the issue of women's representation on album covers because it reflects a broader aspect of music culture and society at large. These representations often perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes and reinforce social norms that objectify women, reducing them to mere objects of sexual desire. This not only marginalises and disrespects women but also contributes to the perpetuation of gender inequalities and a culture of sexism. While rock and metal are known for being rebellious and challenging norms, they often fall short when it comes to the objectification of women's bodies.

Similarly, we see these sexualizations of the female body in specialised rock magazines as well. The focus here is Revolver Magazine, which even has a dedicated calendar for each month featuring the Hottest Chicks in Hard Rock/Metal. Other magazines use catchy slogans and feature sexy photos of women on their covers, such as Metal Hammer, Rock, and Guitar World, among others. It is remarkable how magazines of this magnitude sell the idea of women sensually displaying their bodies, often with their instruments, holding the microphone or guitar as if it were something else, accompanied by attention-grabbing titles like "The Hottest Chicks in Metal," "The 25 Hottest Chicks in Hard Rock," and "Highlighting the 10 Most Beautiful Women in Metal." While one could argue that the use of the word "hottest" is a playful subversion, suggesting that these women are the best in music, the suggestive poses and minimal clothing on the covers undermine such claims. Why aren't the titles more akin to those in men's magazines, such as "The Gods of Rock and Metal" or "The Golden Gods"? We can also understand that, unfortunately, for the promotion of female musicians to happen, women sometimes have to subject themselves to these situations. Perhaps they enjoy it, perhaps they don't.

The problem lies in the promotion of physical magazines, online articles, and features on websites, which make it seem as though women, instead of being recognized for their music, resort to other means to gain attention. This perpetuates the image that women are mere objects, that they only want to be with musicians, that they don't truly love music, and that they make music not out of genuine passion but because they seek attention. However, these issues raise questions about how men are portrayed in these contexts.

5. Conclusion

While adopting the strategy of being "just one of the

guys" was employed by me, you, and many women in the female Rock and Metal scene as a means of survival and adaptation to a space that, while welcoming us as musicians, rejected our bodies, the negation of our bodies, this body that is intimidating, offensive, and inconvenient—the female body, the one that is heavily referenced on album covers, magazine covers, song lyrics—yet is still not fully accepted in music today.

A troubling aspect of all this research is that despite thinking that judging the aesthetics of music based on the instrumental technique of musicians is a complete waste of time, it unfortunately remains quite common among musicians. It's almost akin to debating who has the larger male organ. It's important to emphasise that as a woman, if I am to be judged for my technique, it should be solely for my technique and not for the "technique of a woman." Derogatory expressions like "she plays well for a woman" are still prevalent. By these expressions, I mean that they do not intend to reproduce the impactful phrases we've seen lately, such as "fight like a girl," but rather reflect another side. In recent years, I have noticed the growth of a condescension that is quite bothersome, implicit in the idea that we should not unfairly judge a female performance just because a woman is playing.

I see no issue in being viewed as a woman; the problem lies not in being seen as a female composer but in the fact that this "combination" carries with it identity-based prejudices. Despite this, I realise that I still reproduce the behaviour of being "just one of the guys." Perhaps out of necessity for adaptation, perhaps as a not entirely conscious choice, I have replicated and continue to replicate sexist attitudes. I carry this with me even today, despite my efforts to rationalise and distance myself from these behaviours.

From a psychological perspective, being a woman in Rock instils a self-imposed pressure that we always need to excel, to surpass ourselves and the men, because we need to be "as good as men." These traumas influence our actions, no matter how much we can rationalise. Is Rock sexist? In this discussion, I aimed to demonstrate how the media and the music space itself reproduce the prejudices entrenched in social and economic realms. We replicate the determinations of spaces that are or are not allowed for people, maintaining and even fueling identity-based, social, and economic discrimination.

Today, it is common to see festivals featuring only female bands or with women as members. These actions have been crucial in expanding women's participation spaces. In quantitative terms, it has been significant to see more and more women becoming part of the scene, which undoubtedly encourages many other women to enter this still predominantly male universe. However, it is also noticeable that some of these festivals end up repeating the exclusionary customs of

male-dominated festivals, often not accepting male participation. Despite the undeniable importance of these movements, we cannot ignore the fetishistic nature of it. We are still hearing music made by women, not just music. The body is very present in this relationship. Not that this is a problem, but we cannot ignore that this is also a form of fetish. Connecting with the artist, not with their music. Listening to what they represent, not their music. I repeat that the line between aesthetics and ideology in Rock is very thin (not just in Rock). Can we value aesthetics and ideology by the same terms?

The criticism is not against resistance movements but against the confinement to which we are subjected by living in a system that turns everything into something consumable, profitable, into forms of power and discrimination. I only bring forth problems and elements for us to reflect upon: is it possible to break free from this system loop? I believe we can say that yes, there is sexism in Rock. But not only in Rock and Metal, there is sexism in almost every cultural niche. In many backstage areas of shows, women are harassed, assaulted, violated. Unfortunately. To conclude, I would like to reference the words of a pop famous artist who perfectly encapsulates the entire discussion that we are not accepted, not good enough, compared, objectified, or simply tolerated by society until a certain point because we are successful. After that, we are no longer tolerated. Taylor Swift, (2020), highlights these issues.

“Everyone’s a shiny, new toy for, like two years. The female artists that I know of have reinvented themselves twenty times more than male artists. They have to or else you’re out of a job. Constantly having to reinvent, constantly finding new facets of yourself that people find to be shiny. Be new to us, be young to us, but only in a new way and only in a way we want and reinvent yourself but only in a way that we find to be equally comforting but also a challenge for you. Live out a narrative that we find to be interesting enough to entertain us, but not so crazy that it makes us uncomfortable”.

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