

The Roles of Women in the Contemporary Popular Music Industry

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## Introduction

Over the span of the twentieth century we have encountered the Industrial Revolution which has radically altered the way that Western society functions in general. It has caused a major turn of events in the perception of the implied role of mass media with regard to culture and society. Due to ever-increasing technological advances in communication, the sociological output of individuals presenting their knowledge (and, in turn, personal expressions of their own lives and cultures) has been given a global audience. Broadly, this paper is intended to reflect upon the last quarter of the twentieth century, and the beginnings of the twenty-first, analysing the breakdown of the relations between the cultural stereotypes of both class distinction and gender within society and popular music, that have been a direct effect of this globalisation of the medias - in particular the distinction between these social stereotypes; what is popular and what is 'serious' (or in other words, the distinction between the working 'mass' and the bourgeoisie 'elite'), the appropriate balance of importance regarding the necessity of an artist's talent as opposed to their image in the selection of commercially successful (or 'packaged' pop) artists, and finally, the traditional masculine dominance within the popular music industry. It will reflect strongly upon the role of females within the music industry, and the relative feminist outcry; a rebellion against these apparent masculine ideals of 'females as subordinates', a tradition with which women have been outrageously and unfairly subjected over the history of not only Western, but also many other global cultures.

After the period of postmodernism (in music, beginning in or around the 1970s with the punk movement) women have been granted the opportunity not only to formulate thoughts about themselves in a manner that has never before been efficiently realised, but also to publicly express any resulting views through these forms of popular culture. This newfound freedom of personal expression, brought through by the rise of postmodernism, has increasingly given women the ability to expose their creativity and talent without submitting themselves to any stereotypes induced by the apparent masculinity of the available channels of expression; namely the media. This paper aims to analyse the current and historical roles of women in the popular music industry with regard to their stereotypes enforced by this aforementioned male dominance, and the cultural importance of both this new female freedom of expression, and the slowly improving importance of female working positions within the industry. It is clear that the mass media has, and will continue to have, an important role in both the creation and deconstruction of these, and many other, social stereotypes.

To analyse any element of the current popular music industry without first understanding its origins would have a great potential to result in a possible blinkered lack of perspective with regard to any supplied critical assessments, thus a loss of any real sense of academic worth. Since such an understanding is also important in shedding a better light on current trends and politics, a fairly in-depth account of the history behind the creation and upkeep of the contemporary record industry will be the initial starting point of this paper. This will conclude with an explanation of the theories of musical standardization within the realm of popular music, as established by such critical theorists as Theodor Adorno.

Following from this, there will be an analysis of the roles of women, specifically within the more executive and engineering sides of

the recording industry. This will include an informative study of the roles of women in the music industry, and the historical tradition of their roles having been of lesser importance than the roles of men. Other topics that may be of importance here will be the standards set by performance venues and their relative policies regarding the billing of female artists; and this paper will attempt to understand the ethics, principles and ideologies behind the traditional male dominance of these locations.

Female musicians have often been playing an increasingly important role as artists in breaking down the described social stereotypes inherent in the Western world; thus an analysis regarding the role of females as musicians will form an appropriately sized section of this paper. This discussion will be continued further by examining the semiotics of female artists in the final years of the twentieth century, since the lyrical content of many of the songs written by females is of crucial importance and entirely relevant with respect to the aims of this paper.

Since the 1980s has brought us independent music-specific television channels, the importance of visual representations of artists for commercial purposes has become as much a part of the promotion of these artists as the music they are performing. Added to this, with the recent increase in televisual technologies we have seen the creation of 'interactive' television, which has itself, formed interesting developments upon previous uses of video for promotion with regard to the popular music industry in Britain. The advent of talent shows like 'Pop Idol' and 'Fame Academy', which have incorporated interactivity through viewer voting have cast an extremely relevant light upon the interests of the consumer with respect to this paper.

Several theorists have published relevant and informed material about the rise of postmodernism, gender relations, social hierarchy and general cultural trends in the music industry, and hence a broad variety of their relevant arguments will be mentioned and discussed throughout the paper.

1 The Industrialization of Music



## 1.1 The History of the Record Industry

The most important initial turn of events with regard to the record industry becoming what it is today occurred within a decade of Thomas Edison's invention of the phonograph in 1878. Edison's phonograph was designed with the capability of recording music as one of its main selling points, however a decade later the invention was marketed by the North American Phonograph Company (along with the Bell Telephone Company's graphophone) to offices, with its recommended use being as a dictating device; a strategy which was on the most part unsuccessful. The only company to experience any real success was the Columbia Phonograph Company who marketed the device as a coin-operated novelty machine at fairs, 'providing a choice of 'Sentimental', 'Topical', 'Comic', 'Irish' and 'Negro' songs'<sup>1</sup>.

The design for the phonograph incorporated wax cylinders as the media for reproduction of sound, which were relatively difficult and expensive to produce, thus during 1877 and 1878 another designer, Emile Berliner, developed a similar machine which, instead of wax cylinders, incorporated discs - the idea was that discs could be mass produced much more efficiently and at a lesser cost than that of the wax cylinders. Berliner's main intention with the gramophone was that 'prominent singers, speakers or performers may derive an income from royalties on the sale of their phonautograms'<sup>2</sup>.

Five years later in 1893, Berliner founded the United States Gramophone Company, and made persistent offers to Columbia's head of recording, Fred Gaisberg, to join his company as recording director and as resident talent scout, which was followed in 1897 by Gaisberg's opening of the first commercial recording studio. A hearty legal battle took place between the companies that held the patents behind the phonogram and gramophone over the following five years, which ended in 1902 when Columbia, who had control over Edison's wax cylinder patent, merged patents with the Victor Talking Machine Company, who had the control over Berliner's disc patent.

A whole host of manufacturers appeared in 1914 when these patents began to expire, resulting in a total of 46 separate phonograph companies by 1916; companies whose ulterior projects mostly comprised of entertainment products, musical instruments, or electrical goods (and even bowling balls). Most of the owners of these manufacturing companies had little interest in music, and had even less contact with those who worked in the musical field as it stood at that time, whether it be the performers themselves, or those who presented those performers to the public (agents, promoters, publishers and so on). Indeed Gaisberg recalls that 'for many years Berliner was the only one of the many people I knew connected with the gramophone who was genuinely musical'<sup>3</sup>.

The first major boom in the record industry was experienced in the 1920s, by which time there were many manufacturers of the phonograph in both Britain and America. Competition between these companies was fierce, and revolved around minor design differences and, on the most part, tactical gimmicks. It was necessary for these companies to supply their own records to be used with their devices in order to maximise profits, or primarily to stay afloat in a sea of

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Frith – *Music For Pleasure* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988) p.14

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Roland Gelatt – *The Fabulous Phonograph 1877-1977* (Cassell, London, 1977) p.13

<sup>3</sup> Fred W. Gaisberg – *Music on Record* (Robert Hale, London, 1946) p.25

similar companies, since once the consumer had bought the hardware product, there would be no need for any financial exchange to continue between the consumer and the supplier (and hence the supplier and the manufacturer), excepting upgrades or maintenance, and, more importantly, the consumer would also not have any real desire for the hardware without some software with which to utilise it. This could be considered a very subtle preview of the manner in which companies later would become oligopolistic, with control of all aspects of record production from artist to consumer.

As stated previously, record companies had little musical interest and were owned by those who considered the formation of their companies solely as a part of the electronic goods industry, and, more importantly, solely for financial profit: '[...] record companies were simply part of the electrical goods industry, and quite separate in terms of financial control and ownership from previous musical entrepreneurs. They were owned and run by engineers, inventors and stock market speculators'<sup>4</sup>. Resulting from this lack of musical interest, musical entrepreneurs were hired by the companies to choose what musical content should be supplied to the consumers; thus what was on offer to the public on record was a direct result of the combined tastes of these music entrepreneurs. This section of the industry would later become what is now referred to as 'A&R' (Artists and Repertoire).

Successful stage shows and concert hall performances were the primary output of these highly competitive companies, and interest in trying to sell new musical acts was highly limited due to the indeterminacy of commercial success. It was assumed by most in the industry that the route to maximising profits lay in offering the consumer the ability to create a permanent collection of what was referred to as 'serious' music (classical performances etc.) and not in popular music which was at that time viewed as not only a novelty, but also a short term, working class entertainment attraction, thus not worthy of any serious consideration. An important point as made by Simon Frith is relevant here, which is that 'the initial 'mass market' (this was true for radio, TV and video as well) [was] the relatively affluent middle-class household. The organisation of the record industry around the pop record (and the pop audience) was a later development - a consequence, indeed, of the slump.'<sup>5</sup>

In the five years between 1927 and 1932, American record sales plummeted from 104 million to 6 million; and accordingly phonograph manufacture dropped from 987,000 to 40,000. It was assumed that the record industry had indeed been a novelty, and one that had been short-lived - a novelty that had come and gone and would by no means return. '[T]he talking machine in the parlor, an American institution of redolent memory, had passed from the scene. There was little reason to believe that it would ever come back'<sup>6</sup>. The return of the music industry, and, indeed, its demographic shift towards popular working class tastes, was a direct result of the jukebox. In 1934 there were 25,000, compared with five years later in 1939 when there were 300,000; which alone provided the record companies with 30 million record sales. It seems that the implementation of records in society had returned to its original starting point; as coin-operated entertainment devices.

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<sup>4</sup> Simon Frith – *Music For Pleasure* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988) p.15

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p.16

<sup>6</sup> Roland Gelatt – *The Fabulous Phonograph 1877-1977* (Cassell, London, 1977) p.256

Accordingly popular working class musical taste had then for the first time begun to define the musical output of the record industry.

As a consequence of the slump, the majority of smaller record companies were forced to shut down, and accordingly the industry became an oligopoly - a small group of major companies who controlled every aspect of musical production, from artist to consumer. These major companies were then required, due to poor record sales, to diversify the content of their musical produce; offering a much wider range of musical genres. It was at this point that the record industry began to make its all important move towards being considered part of the music industry rather than that of the electrical goods industry.

In America, the rise of the radio interwove itself with other symbolic changes in the record industry: During the 1930s the record players in American households began to be systematically replaced by radio receivers, which resulted in a notable drop in the sales of music records. This meant that performers finances were accounted for by a shift from collecting profits from record sales to attaining them via royalties and performing rights. As a result of the fierce competition that took place between record companies during the 1930s as a result of the slump, a massive price war occurred; where record companies would sell their records for as little money as possible in the hope that consumers would snap up the bargains. This method proved unsuccessful, and it soon dawned upon these companies that they would have to develop new tactics in order to increase their sales. Here we can see the formation of another sector of the music industry as it is today: advertising and marketing. The first company to realise the positive effects of advertising records was Decca - who quickly discovered that mass sales of one musical product would create a significantly higher return figure than that of the sale of products with average sales figures; thus it became important for these companies to ensure that the sale of singular products were large, rather than to supply many titles that fulfilled the consumer in categories that were essentially niche markets. Decca's first and influential advertising campaign was broadcast via newspapers and the radio, and read as such:

'Here they are - your favourites of radio, screen, and stage - in their greatest performances of instrument and voice! Not obsolete records, cut in price to meet a market, but the latest, newest smash hits - exclusively DECCA. Hear them when you want - as often as you want - right in your own home.'<sup>7</sup>

An important point to note here is made by Simon Frith: 'Decca developed the marketing logic that was to become familiar to the rock fans in the late 1960s: promotion budgets were fixed at whatever figure seemed necessary to produce big sales. Only major companies can afford such risks (and such sums of capital) and the strategy depends upon a star system, on performers whose general popularity is guaranteed in advance'. It was at this point during the 1930s that companies began to create stardom through the recording studio rather than to exploit pre-existing musical stars; it was their intention to fabricate their own style of music instead of following the taste of the masses, and in this manner take control over the consumer by manipulating demand. The production of electrical recording mediums seems to have had a great influence over the record industry's ability to change the perception of what made an artist popular from their ability to perform well live

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<sup>7</sup> Roland Gelatt - *The Fabulous Phonograph 1877-1977* (Cassell, London, 1977) p.268

to their ability to create an emotional response via the radio, record, or jukebox. This important shift marks the beginnings of musical popularity being judged by record sales and radio chart positions. Frith writes that, 'Popular music now described a fixed performance, a recording with the right qualities of intimacy or personality, emotional intensity or ease. [...Record producers] were no longer directly connected to a public - trying to please it on the spot. Their concern was with a market, with popularity as revealed by sales figures, consumers delivered to advertisers. For the record company (as for the film industry) the audience was essentially anonymous; popularity meant, by definition, something that crossed class and regional boundaries; the secret of success was to offend nobody.'<sup>8</sup>

This historical account of the makings of the record industry has shown the origins of every aspect of the modern popular music industry, and has offered explanation for the current oligopoly that exists between the six major companies - all of which stem from a background of electronic goods, and some whose parent companies display massive entertainment industry divergence (AOL Time Warner for example has a commercial stronghold over the Internet - AOL, the media - Time, and the film and music entertainment industries - Warner). We have seen the beginnings of what would become A&R in the 1920s, the influence of advertising and promotion in the 1930s, and the market for popular music shifting from middle class families who collected 'serious' music to popular, working class tastes.

The fact that music has become industrialized raises questions about what music really is and what it should be; whether music should be the ability for artists to have an outlet for their expression, or simply a tool for exploiting these artists to such an extent that musical prowess is perhaps lost, by turning music into a commodity. According to Frith, 'the industrialization of music means a shift from active musical production to passive pop consumption, the decline of folk or community or subcultural traditions, and a general loss of musical skill'<sup>9</sup>, however he also states that, 'The industrialization of music hasn't stopped people from using it to express private joys or public griefs; it has given us new means to do so, new ways of having an impact, new ideas of what music can be. Street music is certainly an industrial noise now, but it's a human noise too so it is perhaps fitting to conclude that the most exciting and political music of the early 1990s should be the hip-hop sounds of young urban black bands like Public Enemy, groups that are heavily dependent on the latest technology and street credibility'<sup>10</sup>. The relevance of the industrialization of music with regard to the roles of women will be examined in Section 2.

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<sup>8</sup> Simon Frith - *Music For Pleasure* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988) p.19

<sup>9</sup> Simon Frith - *Music for Pleasure* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1988) p. 11

<sup>10</sup> Simon Frith - 'The Industrialization of Popular Music' in J. Lull (Ed.) - *Popular Music and Communication* (Sage, Newbury Park, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1992) pp. 49-74

## 1.2 Popular Music: Theories of Standardization and Rationalization

The principle theories of standardization in the realm of popular music date back to the 1940's, when Theodor Adorno wrote several papers on popular music and its standardization. Adorno joined the University of Frankfurt in 1923, where he became a member of the Frankfurt School of theorists and writers. Adorno and his fellow critical theorists (Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Jurgen Habermas, amongst others) attempted to develop sociological thought from Marxism via structured theoretical criticism. One of his major criticisms was that capitalist society created a control over social life and cultures, and that this was the cause of several inequalities throughout Western society. When he worked with Horkheimer, his resulting opinion was that the culture industry (including the music industry) was specifically interlinked with such capitalist control and domination<sup>11</sup>.

Relevant to this paper, Adorno's most important assertion refers to the apparent 'standardization' that occurred specifically within popular music; as opposed to 'serious' music.

'In contemporary capitalist societies the culture industry produces forms of culture which are commodities: that is, culture which is produced to be bought and sold on a market. It possesses exchange value and the companies that produce culture do so to make a profit from it [...] Such commodification had become increasingly widespread, penetrating all aspects of cultural production and social life. This led to a standardization of the products of the culture industries, which in turn induced a passivity in those who consume the culture industry products'<sup>12</sup>.

Adorno concluded that the capitalist society within which the Western world is structured causes popular music to become standardized by provoking it to become a market-orientated device for financial profit rather than an avenue for serious emotive expression; and thus, rather than distinguish music between its relative audience's class distinctions, he would divide the music that was standardized and that which wasn't into music that was created to function as a commodity and music that was created as an expression of emotions.

He claimed that the commodified form of music which was available could be standardized along such groups as the song's genre, the song itself and individual sections of the song. He argues further that these individual sections of any popular commercial song are freely interchangeable: 'the beginning of the chorus is replaceable by the beginning of innumerable other choruses. The interrelationship among the elements[,] or the relationship of the elements to the whole would be unaffected. In Beethoven, position is important only in a living relation between a concrete totality and its concrete parts. In popular music, position is absolute. Every detail is substitutable; it serves its function only as a cog in a machine'<sup>13</sup>. In essence this suggestion serves to clarify the underlying notion that though the

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<sup>11</sup> T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer – 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' in J. Curran, M. Gurevitch and J. Woollacott (Eds.) – *Mass Communication and Society* (Edward Arnold in association with Oxford University Press, London, 1977) pp. 349-83

<sup>12</sup> Brian Longhurst – *Popular Music and Society* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995) p. 4

<sup>13</sup> T. Adorno – 'On Popular Music' in S. Frith and A. Goodwin (Eds.) – *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word* (Routledge, London, 1990) p.303

details or variations of such standardized songs may be thrown together in any order, the overall structure of the song will always remain the same. A more recent critical theorist, Andrew Goodwin, has brought these ideas of popular music standardization and the interchangeable aspect of popular music song variation into the more general realm of modern popular music by arguing that, 'pop songs often utilise the same or very similar drum patterns, chord progressions, song structures, and lyrics while being distinguished by marketing techniques (the construction of 'personalities' involved in selling, say, New Kids on the Block, the make-up once worn by the band Kiss), performance quirks (Michael Jackson's 'hiccup', Madonna's 'controversial' videos) or rhetorical gestures (Pete Townsend's 'windmill' swing at his guitar, Chuck Berry's 'duck walk')'<sup>14</sup>.

To help understand Adorno's definition of what is 'serious' music and what is not, it is useful to refer to Jay's distinction, which suggests that the definition is drawn between music which is produced specifically for a market and music that is not. Jay argues that, 'the real dichotomy, Adorno contended was not between 'light' and serious 'music' - he was never a defender of traditional cultural standards for their own sake - but rather between music that was market-oriented and music that was not'<sup>15</sup>. The distinction between Adorno's considerations of what is serious musically is further identified in Figure 1. Adorno argued that the resulting effects on the listener of popular standardized music was that he or she would become inattentive, distracted, emotional, and obedient to the apparent control of the music's producers or creators. It is clear that the audience that attach themselves to popular music do not listen to it in the same way that we are told we should listen to, say, a symphonic work by any classical composer. Popular music becomes a part of everyday background noise, whether we are listening to it in the supermarket, at work, in a taxi, or at home. Rather than sitting down to listen to it and thus giving it all of our attention (as it is suggested that we should for the likes of a Beethoven symphony), we often keep it at this background level. Adorno argues that what pleasure the listener may receive from standardized popular music is both 'superficial' and 'false'; that the 'standardized beat' that accompanies this standardized popular music may cause the listener to become 'a 'slave to the rhythm', following the standardized beat of the song and becoming overpowered or conditioned to it'. He also states that one specific form of pleasure that can be derived from standardized pop poses a potential sociological threat, a pleasure that he calls 'emotional'. He claims that, 'feelings of emotion brought on by the popular song are false or immature, rather than deep or penetrating. There is no comparison between such feelings and the sorts of emotion which can be generated and expressed by the best forms of serious music'<sup>16</sup>

The problems inherent in Adorno's argument are significant, however there are many aspects of his argument that are relevant to the popular music industry of today. Not only have many things changed within the sphere of critical theory since the time of Adorno, but also

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<sup>14</sup> Andrew Goodwin - 'Rationalization and Democratization in the New Technologies of Popular Music' in J. Lull (Ed.) - *Popular Music and Communication* (Sage, Newbury Park, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1992) p. 76

<sup>15</sup> M. Jay - *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950* (Heinemann, London, 1973) p. 182

<sup>16</sup> Brian Longhurst - *Popular Music and Society* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995) p. 6

the industry itself has developed immensely. Specifically, it has been argued by Gendron that Adorno confuses the distinction between what is termed as 'functional' and 'textual' artefacts; where a functional artefact would be for example the physical form of a book or, in the case of music, a record or compact disc, and where a textual artefact would be the information printed on these physical, 'functional' items (which would be the text itself in the case of the book, or the music that can be reproduced by the record or compact disc). Gendron argues that, 'a text (whether written or oral) is a universal, whereas a functional artefact is a particular. However, to be marketed and possessed, every universal text must be 'embodied' in a functional artefact (paper, vinyl discs)',<sup>17</sup>.

Gendron also argues against Adorno's definition of the interchangeable aspect of popular music using the same functional versus textual argument; his main line of argument is that this part interchangeability, with regard specifically to the functional artefact, is a direct result of the fact that the product will have been created on a production line: 'In this system of production, every whole (e.g. the automobile) is assembled out of qualitatively different parts, each of which is taken at random from qualitatively indistinguishable batches'<sup>18</sup>. It follows in his criticism that technological advances in the modern production of popular music may have actually increased the possibility for a more extensive number of variations. Longhurst notes that, 'this may be seen in the marketing of music in a number of different formats, which leads to greater availability of different forms. Further, the importance of the relatively cheap tape cassette also increases the variety of available music, which can also be copied by those who have bought the original tape'<sup>19</sup>. Since the main bulk of Adorno's work was written in the 1930s and 1940s, it is possible that his findings with regard to the standardization of popular music would have been accurate at that time, however when his work is applied to the popular music of today, where we have experienced a much broader diversity of musical genres and tastes, it is perhaps a little off the mark. This is not to say, however, that his work does not highlight any other misgivings of the current popular music industry. It seems that Adorno has failed to notice that the pleasure that is derived from one genre of popular music may well be of an entirely different nature to that of any other genre of popular music, or indeed what Adorno considered to be 'serious'. For example, reasons why people listen to certain types of music are often to attain other types of pleasure than simply emotive pleasure; for instance some types of music may be consumed because they are good to work to, or are suitable for dancing or exercise, or induce contemplation in the listener.

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<sup>17</sup> B. Gendron – 'Theodor Adorno Meets the Cadillacs' in: T. Modelski (Ed.) – *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1986) p. 298

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 297

<sup>19</sup> Brian Longhurst – *Popular Music and Society* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995) pp.11-2

Figure 1 -

'The structure of production and consumption of 'serious' and 'popular' music'<sup>20</sup>

*'Serious music'*

Every part/detail depends 'for its musical sense on the concrete totality and never on a mere enforcement of a musical scheme'

Themes and details are highly interwoven with the whole

Themes are carefully developed

Details cannot be changed without altering the whole - details almost contain/anticipate the whole

Consistency is maintained between formal structure and content (themes)

If standard schemes are employed (e.g. for dance) they still maintain a key role in the whole

Emphasizes norms of high technical competence

*'Popular music'*

Musical composition follows familiar patterns/frameworks: they are stylized

Little originality is introduced

Structure of the whole does not depend upon details - whole is not altered by individual detail

Melodic structure is highly rigid and is frequently repeated

Harmonic structure embodies a set scheme ('The most primitive harmonic facts are emphasized')

Complications have no effect on structure of work - they do not develop themes

Stress is on combination of individual 'effects' - on sound, colour, tone, beat, rhythm

Improvisations become 'normalized' (the boys can only 'swing it' in a narrow framework)

Details are substitutable (they 'serve their function as cogs in machines')

Affirms conventional norms of what constitutes intelligibility in music while appearing novel and original

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<sup>20</sup> D. Held - *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas* (Hutchinson, London, 1980) p. 101

Another theory that perhaps develops onward from Adorno's standardization theory is that of extensions of Max Weber's theories of rationalization. Max Weber was a German sociologist before the times of Adorno. Weber developed an argument that Western societies were beginning to become more and more rationalized, as society began to form a clear set of hierarchical positions within social order, where rising up the hierarchical scale would involve proof of merit; where society is controlled by fixed laws. More recently, George Ritzer has followed on from Weber's work by arguing that other areas of social life have become organised via these layers of bureaucracy. Ritzer's theories suggest that social life is not indeed organized in terms of Bureaucracy, but instead is beginning to be organized using the same techniques as the fast-food burger restaurant, McDonalds. According to Ritzer, these layers of organization are defined as 'efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control'<sup>21</sup>. 'Hence the burgers and rolls in McDonald's restaurants are of a precise size and are cooked for an exactly measured period of time. The products and surroundings in McDonaldized organizations are standardized and predictable. The idea is that a hamburger will taste the same in New York, London, Paris or Moscow. Finally, the processes in organizations like McDonald's are controlled with clear lines of management'<sup>22</sup>.

Some theorists have argued that popular music fits into this rationalized definition. Andrew Goodwin, for example, has stated that, 'just as capitalist societies need increasingly to rationalize production to bring order to the creation of commodities, so Western music also creates a network of rules for music making. Thus a universal notational system and precise measurement of tonal and rhythmic differences comes to define what music is'<sup>23</sup>. He continues by identifying three areas in which popular music is rationalised; the harmonic (melodic), the temporal (rhythmic), and the timbral (tonal): 'Harmonic rationalization occurs partly, for instance, through the elimination of microtonality that is involved in many modern synthesizers. This has implications for the globalization of music because many non-Western musics depend on microtones that are difficult to achieve on Western synthesizers'<sup>24</sup>. His definition of temporal rationalization stems from the use of the drum machine, where tempo is limited to beats per minute; and his definition of timbral rationalization stems from the fact that modern Western synthesizers are set to only perform a limited number of factory-preset sounds. Thus, 'the new machines produce the same sounds whoever plays them, whenever and wherever they are played'<sup>25</sup>. This rationalization of society is evident in the study of the locations where records are being bought by the public. Increasingly, record purchases are occurring in chain superstores, like Virgin, HMV, Tower Records, and so on; where the product is efficiently categorized, selected by the consumer, and taken to the till operator, who typically only interacts with the consumer in order to take their money.

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<sup>21</sup> George Ritzer – *The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Social Life* (Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks, 1993)

<sup>22</sup> Brian Longhurst – *Popular Music and Society* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995) p. 15

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Goodwin – 'Rationalization and Democratization in the New Technologies of Popular Music' in J. Lull (Ed.) – *Popular Music and Communication* (Sage, Newbury Park, 1992) p. 76

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 83

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p. 84



## 2 The Female Role



## 2.1 Male Dominance in the Recording Industry

This section of the paper will attempt to outline the extreme gender imbalance that has continually been in occurrence throughout the structure of the record industry; and to identify those roles which have traditionally been offered to women. Over the course of the twentieth century, not only in the music industry but also in many other social groups in the Western world, women have occupied positions at jobs that typically accord lower income and lower hierarchical status than that of men. This imbalance has been documented by critical theorists such as Simon Frith<sup>26</sup> and Keith Negus, who has suggested that it is reflected in the proportions of office space offered to men and women respectively<sup>27</sup>

Due to the highly developed structure of the recording industry (as described in section 1.1), if a musical group wish to attempt to make themselves commercially successful, it is necessary for them to make their presence (and music) known in several different social institutions; and to become acquainted with several people that inhabit certain key positions within these institutions. These key personnel have often been attributed the title of 'gatekeepers', or, as Negus titled them, 'cultural intermediaries'. One of the most important of these key positions in deciding the fate of a musician's career is that of A&R, since despite the obvious importance and subsequent relevance of the public's musical taste, it is very difficult to accurately define what the public will purchase; and thus it is the A&R section of the music industry that will have the ability to choose which records will finally end up on the shelves. Thus it is primarily the taste of the A&R personnel that we as consumers are inevitably forced to follow. It has been observed by many theorists and also by the companies themselves that these talent scouts will select between major stars or 'serious' music for long term investments, and certain 'lightweight' novelty acts for a more short term investment (also explained in section 1.1).

A&R has always been dominated by males, and this is reflected in the way that artists are selected for record companies. As it stands at present, any group that consists in its entirety of females is to be considered either a novelty or a cult act. An example of this would be the stardom of Irish pop-folk group, the Corrs. The Corrs are four siblings who have performed together since their childhood, and though their talent could not possibly be disputed here, it becomes a fair suggestion that those A&R personal who were attracted to the Corrs saw several novelty aspects in their act which might have been the potential selling points for consumers; and thus their reason for having them signed might not have solely been for their musical talent: the group consists of three sisters; a drummer, a violinist and a singer, and finally a brother who occupies the role of guitarist. Perhaps it was these attributes that aided in their success. It is fair to say that these A&R personnel will also immediately limit the number of commercially musical categories that female artists and performers can fit into. As for the roles of women in the A&R section of the music industry, they are commonly fitted into the category of personal

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<sup>26</sup> see Simon Frith – *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (Constable, London. 1983)

<sup>27</sup> see Keith Negus – *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry* (Edward Arnold, London, 1992)

secretary or even simply that of a sex object. For example, an all male band that had attracted the attention of A&R man Keith Wozencroft in 1996 was signed after 'an ugly A&R scramble that involved one rival sending the band a call girl as a present.'<sup>28</sup>

It has been argued that the only area within the record industry that allows females to be both prolific and appreciated as workers is that of the music press and PR (Public Relations) sectors, which have been considered as places where women hold the majority of positions<sup>29</sup>. Mavis Bayton argues that, 'this is not surprising, as much of the work requires so-called 'feminine' attributes, since nurturing the fragile egos of rock stars is an important responsibility[...] the job involves close dealings with (predominantly male) journalists, when women are utilised for their sex appeal and 'charm' in situations which can become institutionalized flirting'<sup>30</sup>. Bayton continues by arguing that the industry sectors of music press and public relations were free in all respects from female workers during the 1970s and the years preceding, and that the reason behind their profile becoming so prolific within this sector is down to a concerted effort on behalf of women to enter into this field. She also suggests that there are women taking the 'higher profile' roles in such positions as international marketing, promotion, market research, and video production. However, according to Negus, women have not yet successfully managed to securely occupy the high roles within these groups that are able to make the key decisions<sup>31</sup>.

Another influential 'cultural intermediary' position within the music industry is that of the media. Perhaps the most influential aspect of the media with regard to the success of artists is the radio, or more particularly, the radio disc jockey (or DJ). The importance of the radio as a public promotion tool is that it is more easily accepted by its audience since the record companies themselves have no real control over what the radio stations choose to air. The airing of an artist's performances on the radio is considered to be one of the most effective forms of promotion available, since the radio has such an enormous audience, and on average its play-list is determined by what is popular at any given time. Despite this, until the late 1990's it was extremely uncommon for a radio station to employ a female DJ. In addition, those female DJs that did receive employment also received ridicule, and were considered not to be serious or adequate at their profession: for example, Anne Nightingale, who was the only female DJ on BBC Radio 1 for the majority of the 1980s and 1990s, was greeted in the industry with similar ridicule and hostility as that which has been displayed to those females who have attempted to 'invade' any number of previously all-male societies<sup>32</sup>. At present, the majority of popular mainstream radio stations have at least one female DJ, yet female DJs are without doubt still in the minority. Indeed it could be argued that

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<sup>28</sup> *The Guardian*, 8<sup>th</sup> March 1996

<sup>29</sup> Lucy O'Brien – *She Bop: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1995)

<sup>30</sup> Mavis Bayton – *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998) p.3

<sup>31</sup> Keith Negus – *Producing Pop: Culture and Conflict in the Popular Music Industry* (Edward Arnold, London, 1992)

<sup>32</sup> see Sue Steward and Sheryl Garratt – *Signed, Sealed and Delivered: True Life Stories of Women in Pop* (Pluto Press, London, 1984) pp. 83-85

a reason for their inclusion may well simply be in order to reinforce the political correctness of the radio station itself.

Alongside the radio, music journalism plays an appropriately influential role in the success of artists. For an up-and-coming artist, reviews made by music journalists in the press can have an overwhelming influence on their success and can provoke interest from both record company's talent scouts, and a potential fan-base. It can also make them able to play more regularly as it can take the role of an artist reference for the venues that otherwise they might not have been able to perform in. As with most of the other industry groups already mentioned, female music journalists are still in the minority, and thus a heavily male-dominated view tends to occupy the music press. Another aspect of music journalism, aside from reports and reviews, is band photography. Again, typically the photographer will be male, and often when photographing female-fronted bands, the women performer will be asked to step forward in front of the rest of the band, as it is perhaps their physical form and attractiveness that sells their image, more than that of any musical talent that they may possess. This is even true of photography of all-female bands, but clearly it becomes noteworthy with mixed groups, since it shows that the female is taken to be more important visually. Manda Rin, female performer from the pop band Bis states that, 'There's two boys in the band and me and they always make me stand in the middle and forward from the other two [...] We usually prefer to stand in a row. That's how we do it on stage [...] There's no main person [...] I stand at the side. So it's not as if we are a female-fronted band at all. But I do get that a lot. It's like, 'Oh, Manda, come forward' and 'Manda do this' and it's not very fair on the other two'<sup>33</sup>. As it presently stands, it is quite uncommon for women performers to be able to choose the way that they will be portrayed photographically in the music media.

As a band begins to step away from the amateur scene, typically they will invest in agents, promoters and managers. Once again, all of these roles have traditionally been dominated by males. The primary use of an agent for any band is that they will have the necessary (male) contacts within the industry, to secure gigs at more high-brow venues, and will also save the band the time that it takes to organise gigs. It could be argued that since these agents and promoters are commonly male, they have often discriminated against female artists in general, possibly more so if they choose not to be portrayed as sex objects. As all-female instrumental bands are still seen as a novelty act, it has been known that venue proprietors will not allow two female performers to perform on the same night in their venue, even if they play in completely separate genres. The role of the band manager is also highly influential; the manager acts as the intermediary between the band and its record company, choosing what songs they should record, helping to form their public image, deciding how much money should be put into the band, and they have a direct influence in organising the band for maximum commercial success. Thus, the manager often attempts to propel the band into the direction that he (typically) sees fit, sometimes pressurising the band into getting rid of certain players or to change their fundamental image. Since all of these roles within the industry are interlinked, and have also been traditionally male, female managers

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<sup>33</sup> Manda Rin of pop group Bis, quoted in Mavis Bayton – *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998) p. 4

are often not taken seriously or ridiculed, and this may act as a deterrent for females who wish to secure careers in this field.

At some point, for a band to become commercially successful, they must end up in a recording studio of some sort, and again these roles are stereotypically male. During this author's educational career in sound engineering, females have taken up an average ratio of one woman to fifteen men, and according to the British listings in the 1995 edition of Kemps International Music Book, the section titled 'producers, engineers and programmers' showed that there were 13 women to a total of 649 men. Many female artists have avoided the traditional routes of music recording since with the technological advance of multi-tracking, the production side of the record industry has been taking a much more creative role, and hence these women feel that having a male producing their work will affect it's final outcome. Artists that have produced their own material include Joni Mitchell, Tori Amos, and Kate Bush.

This male domination of the record industry continues when the band finally get to a professional level and begin to tour. It is common for the 'roadie' role to be fulfilled by a male, since it consists of the constant shifting (into and out of the tour bus) of some extremely heavy stage equipment. Lighting and stage crew are also typically male. Traditionally the only female roles while on tour have been as a 'groupie' for the band, where the groupies' role is to pamper the artist and to keep them company. This has commonly been an area where male bands will treat them as sex objects and direct sexist jokes and comments either at them, or in their presence. On arrival at the venue, the majority of stage occupations are also dominated by men. The exception to this rule is that of the role of security, who will line up between the audience and the artist, preventing the audience members from harassing the artists. In this role it is now compulsory that venues provide at least one female security guard (to control the female audience members) so that the security company do not get sued for sexual harassment. The only other jobs in which women are prolific are the collection of tickets, the box office, and working behind the bar. Even the role of live sound engineer has been predominantly male. Typically the sound engineer will organise a separate stage mix for the artists and another for the audience. This involves equalisation for the vocalists, where the frequency range of the human voice is allowed to pass through, but the frequencies above and below this range will be dropped out. It is most common for the stage crew to come up on stage and test the microphones to allow the live sound engineer to set up this equalization. As the stage crew will probably be male, and men and women have different frequency ranges inherent in their voices, this means that the sound for the band will be set up incorrectly for female vocalists, and often the female artists will come in specifically to set up their own vocal sound for this reason.

The typical gender distribution of social roles in the popular music industry is demonstrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2 -

'Typical gender distribution of social roles in the popular music world'<sup>34</sup>

FEMALE

singer  
backing vocalist  
fan  
groupie  
wife  
mother  
dancer

MALE

instrumentalist  
manager of band  
live sound engineer  
technician (guitar tech, drum tech, etc.)  
roadie  
lighting engineer  
rigger  
road manager  
music press photographer  
buyer for retail chain  
sales rep  
promoter  
plugger  
club DJ  
music press journalist  
radio DJ

RECORD COMPANY

receptionist  
secretary  
personal assistant  
publicity officer  
member of sales team  
member of marketing  
packer  
cook  
cleaner  
'tea lady'  
factory worker

company executive  
A&R director  
A&R manager  
talent scout  
sales executive  
team marketing director

RECORDING STUDIO

receptionist

studio manager  
producer  
sound engineer  
tape operator  
technician  
programmer

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<sup>34</sup> from Mavis Bayton – *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998) p. 26



## 2.2 Women as Artists

Throughout the popular music world, female artists have been accepted within certain roles, however they are usually only as a singer or a dancer within the history of the twentieth century. As discussed previously, any woman playing the guitar or drums is often considered to be a novelty. Perhaps a reasonable argument for the reason that women are accepted as singers is due to the fact that it is impossible for a male to recreate the female voice. The female voice is commonly placed above that of the male voice, and is seen as a 'natural' instrument, and thus it is often considered that the voice is not a set of learned techniques and skills, but instead a direct connection with the inner emotion of the vocalist. Lucy Green writes that the way 'that singing affirms patriarchal definitions of femininity is to do with the absence of technology in singing. Within patriarchy, man is being constructed as being in control of nature through the harnessing of technology, woman as part of the nature that man controls. No extraneous object to be controlled by the singing woman interrupts her construction of the metaphorical mask of display, since the musical sound-source of her performance remains locked in the body. The sight and sound of the woman singing therefore affirms the correctness of what is absent: the unsuitability of any serious and lasting connection between woman and instrument, woman and technology [...]In this way the woman singer can continue to appeal to nature, to be natural; and her real ability to manipulate technology is temporarily effaced'<sup>35</sup>.

A relevant point is made by Mavis Bayton, 'There is nothing natural about the contemporary pop female singing voice, because there is nothing intrinsically natural about any kind of actual vocal expression, voices being governed by changing cultural rules and fashions and varying between genres. With vocals as with music, the record industry works with a set of categories into which it seeks to mould its performers, with the aim of controlling consumer choice. Gender is inevitably a factor in this categorization process. The categories available for women are restricted, and women's music which cannot be fitted into these may be either rejected outright as unsuitable for signing or altered so that they do fit'<sup>36</sup>.

During the 1950's and the 1960's, due to this belief that singing was seen primarily as a female pastime, some all-female groups that were solely vocal were witnessed throughout the popular music charts - for example the Shirelles - but during the later end of the 1960's, new developments in jazz and rock and roll made the purely vocal groups redundant, since part of the appeal of these new 'beat' groups was that they had to play (electric) instruments.

Later, in the 1970's, a dominant theme of female sexuality emerged through the media and through culture in general. In these times the newly emerging disco genre allowed several female singers to overtly convey this sexual liberation, however it was still tied down by the sexist ethics of those males that produced and delivered it to us as consumers (section 2.1). Artists such as Sister Sledge and Donna Summer portrayed themselves in the ways that were expected by the male record producers of the time; as sexy, fun-loving girls - a style that was on the most part adopted by the female audience on the dance-floor.

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<sup>35</sup> Lucy Green – *Music, Gender, Education* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997) pp. 28-9

<sup>36</sup> Mavis Bayton – *Frock Rock, Women Performing Popular Music* (Oxford University Press, Oxford) p. 14

Punk music was the next major musical revolution to occur, and it stood in stark contrast to the disco ideology: 'there emerged the image of a rebellious, punkish woman who was anti-fashion, anti-sex and generally anti-mainstream conventions'. One of the more commercially successful and public women at the fore front of this revolution, would be Debbie Harry from the group Blondie. Debbie Harry shocked the public with her strong performances and visual appearance (she once appeared at an awards ceremony dressed in clothing made entirely of razor blades; an appearance that is now legendary). Other artists to have made similarly strong impressions of themselves would include Siouxsie Sue of Siouxsie and the Banshees, Patti Smith, and Chrissie Hynde of the Pretenders.

In the 1980s, satellite television was introduced; a global television network that offered individual, independent music-only channels, like MTV and VH1. When MTV (Music Television) was first aired, it quickly identified its market as that of non-threatening, and, most importantly, fun-time orientated pop music consumers. It offered repeated promotional videos from female artists such as the Bangles and Bananarama who eventually became the sexy, bubbly stars of the MTV era. At the end of the 1980s came the arrival of a highly influential and mainstream feminine pop music star, namely Madonna. Madonna's identity has been ever changing throughout her artistic history, however it seems to have always been her that was in control of her often confrontational and highly controversial personal image and videos. One of the most striking mass airings of feminist viewpoints occurred when she released her 'Express Yourself' single, a notion that reverberated globally in the way that her massive female audience chose to represent themselves. Indeed it is often argued that both Madonna and Annie Lennox (of the Eurythmics, and later a solo artist) revealed and exposed the celebrity female image as the social construct that it is, and then continued to show how these social stereotypes of the female image could be altered whenever they pleased<sup>37</sup>. These strong women (amongst others) have contributed thoroughly to the perception of the extent to which popular music can be a social tool, by promoting the debate around political and social issues raised by their music, lyrics and image, rather than simply submitting themselves to the tame, fun-loving criteria that would be expected of them by such institutions as MTV or other male dominated sectors of the music industry.

In the 1990s, a new era of feminist musical rebellion took place in the form of the 'Riot Grrrl'. Riot Grrrls, originating in the underground rock scene of America, were a political movement of new-age feminist musicians. Their musical origins were in essence an offshoot of the previous grunge and hardcore rock phenomena based in America - the most mainstream of which was the grunge band Nirvana, who in the course of their career inspired many young musicians to pick up guitars and play. Such bands as Hole (with Kurt Cobain's (Nirvana's frontman's) wife, Courtney Love as front-woman), L7, Babes in Toyland and Bikini Kill were all placed under the label of Riot Grrrls. 'A political agenda was formulated and an attempt was made to create an organized network amongst all-girl bands, via fanzines so that the Riot Grrrl movement was a genuine female youth subculture with the explicit aim of

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<sup>37</sup> see Beata Maruszak, 'Women's Quest for Empowerment in the Pop-Music Culture of the 1990's' in - Irmina Wawrzyczek and Dr. Zbigniew Mazur (Eds.) - *Studying "New" Britain: Popular Culture and Ideology* (University of Warsaw, unpublished) - <http://elt.britcoun.org.pl/forum/marusz.htm>

encouraging women to move into all areas of the rock world'<sup>38</sup>. A fair understanding of the Riot Grrrl ethos can be determined from their label alone; the ethics of the Riot Grrrl are essentially those of an ironic and contradictory approach that results in the parody of the ideals of political correctness that had become heavily established by the 1990s. Thus the term 'Grrrl' could be taken as the growl of furious anger that these women have given towards this political correctness that has swamped the media; even down to the feminists that preceded them by a generation, who would not have termed themselves 'girls', but women - arguably in an attempt to promote their image of individualistic strength. The lyrics of these bands often contained confrontational and controversial descriptions regarding the social concerns of young girls in the last decade of the twentieth century; these including such topics as anorexia and bulimia, date rape, oral sex, incest and body mutilation. Several of these artists successfully attempted to bring the meanings of such derogatory terms as 'bitch', 'slut', 'whore' and so on, by writing them on their bodies during and outside public performances. Neil Nehring raises some interesting points about this practice: 'Women are on constant display, everywhere, as semen receptacles. The "gaze," when it comes to women, is real; Riot Grrrls write BITCH, RAPE, SLUT and WHORE on their bodies because that's what a lot of men *already* see there. Beyond physical assault, though, as well as pornography and the whole sex industry, the problem is how "normal" guys have learned to look at women - as well as how *not* to hear them, a problem women in punk rock are obviously working on. (They're not preaching to the converted; even at shows by female-led punk bands, I've heard men in the presumably progressive audience enthuse about the performers' breasts.)'<sup>39</sup>

As a stark contrast to this overt feminism, in 1997 another form of overt feminism took centre stage when a girl group took the mainstream pop charts by storm, claiming to be a band fighting for the rights of women - making a stand against the power imbalance that exists between the sexes and attempting to demonstrate that women can make something of themselves so long as they never stop trying to achieve their dream goals. In truth, these five British hopefuls were whittled down from thousands and grouped together after several auditioning sessions for a commercially manufactured pop group - a group with so much money pumped into publicity and promotion that there could be as little risk as possible that this mass business venture might not reap mass returns. The record label was right and as such the Spice Girls quickly became a phenomenon. Each girl had their own nickname: Melanie B - 'Scary Spice', Melanie C - 'Sporty Spice', Geri Halliwell 'Ginger Spice', Emma Bunton - 'Baby Spice', and Victoria Adams (now Beckham) - 'Posh Spice'. It seems that a wide variety of social stereotypes had been incorporated into the creation of this group, presumably with the intention of giving the audience each an individual and personal role model, in essence attracting fans from all kinds of backgrounds who could each relate to at least one of the five as a personal idol. As already stated, and conveyed in numerous press conferences and interviews, The Spice Girls had an apparently strong feminist stance, viewpoints which were ultimately immortalised by their

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<sup>38</sup> Mavis Bayton - *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998) p. 75

<sup>39</sup> Neil Nehring - *Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism: Anger is an Energy* (Sage, London, 1997) p. 153

never-ending motto of 'Girl Power' - a phrase which was continually plastered across the front and middle of many tabloid newspapers. It could be argued however, that the feminist stance of this five-some girl-band was completely nullified and indeed seems outrageously inauthentic when contrasted with the fact that their music and lyrics were written by men, as a group they were selected by men, and thus their whole image was created by men.

A decent analogy for this act of using feminist issues as a commercial selling point would be that of the 1970s cult drama series 'Charlie's Angels' and its two recent major release, spin-off, blockbuster movies. The concept of the series and, by default, the films, is that of three strong willed and powerful, independent women, who unravel crime stories, and then implement their own form of justice to prevent and fight these crimes. In the immensely high budget movies, Charlie's Angels were cast as Lucy Liu, Cameron Diaz and Drew Barrimore. In the publicity and promotion of the movies, these three young women often were portrayed semi-clothed or totally nude on the front cover of glamorous male orientated magazines, and considered mainstream independent feminine figures of personal strength, poise, dignity and beauty; ideals which in this light can only remain absolutely superficial. Added to this, all of the actions of the three girls in the show are controlled by a strict and dominating male, Charlie, who only ever operates behind the scenes via telephone conversations; remaining totally invisible to the casual observer.

The intended meaning that should be derived from this analogy is not literal however; instead it does effectively account for the story of the Spice Girls in a metaphorical sense: Five overt feminists in an operation controlled by a male that spreads an image to the public that is so specifically and intelligently designed in order to sell, that it does so without the bulk of it's consumers ever realising that it is in every sense doing exactly the opposite of the ideology which it promotes as its main selling point. The ideology that is what makes it so popular with its audience - girl power.

As a side note, one of the most successful songs from the soundtrack of the first Charlie's Angels film was performed by an all-girl group by the name of 'Destiny's Child'. The main lyrical content of the song invites all those females who are making immense amounts of money (and living a consequently rich lifestyle) to acquire both a certain self satisfaction, and a certain bond with the singer, for having 'done one up' on the men of this world. Lyrics are often as important as the music itself in the conveying of emotion through popular music, and have often been used as a political tool, attempting to break down present social barriers and stereotypes. The next section provides an analysis of one of these pop songs.

### 3 Semiotic Analyses



### 3.1 The Lyrics of Contemporary Female Artists: Portishead - 'Glory Box'

In the words of Myra Macdonald, 'semiotics is an attempt to apply scientific principles to the study of signs in order to explain how meaning is produced'<sup>40</sup>. In these two sections an attempt will be made to study the meaning inherent in the lyrics of certain popular music songs lyrics. During the twentieth century, women have been using the power of lyrical expression to embody the social aspirations of females with regard to being considered serious and intelligent. For the sake of this analysis, lyrics will be studied as if they were poetry, using traditional literary approaches, and as poems that can only truly be understood in conjunction with the music that they accompany.

As described previously in this paper, there is a definite gender imbalance between males and females, not only in the record industry, but also in many other aspects of social life. A song that identifies with this power distinction between men and women is 'Glory Box' by 'Portishead', released as a single from their seminal debut album, 'Dummy' (for full lyrics - see Appendix (i)). From the musical introduction we instantly get the impression of weariness from the slow downward plod of the arpeggio chord progressions. This same four chord progression repeats itself throughout the entirety of the song.

The overall meaning that the song delivers describes the inner feelings of a woman who is in a relationship with a man, and wishes to state her inner feelings regarding manners in which the relationship should be altered to better satisfy her. The first 6 lines of the song describe the woman's will to end the relationship on account of her needs failing to have been satisfied:

1           I'm so tired  
              Of playing  
              Playing with this bow and arrow  
              Gonna give my heart away  
5           Leave it to the other girl's to play  
              For I've been a temptress too long

The 'bow and arrow' refers to the mythical tool of the Greek God of love, Cupid, who would shoot arrows from the heavens, in turn causing the struck humans to fall in love with each other. Here, she rejects this image of love as a game, and falls back into the desire for a more sophisticated relationship, as identified in lines 7-9:

7           Just give me a reason to love you  
              Give me a reason to be a woman  
9           I just wanna be a woman

In the next verse, she elaborates upon her rejection of the man, and his insufficient part in the relationship:

10          From this time  
              Unchained  
              We're all looking at a different picture

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<sup>40</sup> Myra Macdonald - *Representing Women: Myths of Femininity in the Popular Media* (London, 1995) p.

Through this new frame of mind  
14 A thousand flowers could bloom  
15 Move over and give them some room, yeah

Here the female character has noticed that she doesn't need to be involved in such an oppressive relationship with the man, and asks him to leave ('move over') and give room for 'flowers' to grow. These metaphorical flowers provoke an image of her emotional stability becoming repaired after her heart is 'unchained' from the attachment to her man.

Finally she suggests to the man that he changes his perception of what a relationship should be:

19 So don't you stop being a man  
Just take a little look  
From outside when you can  
So, a little tenderness  
23 No matter if you cry

She suggests that the man should, at some time when he's ready, look at the relationship with the perspective of an outsider's viewpoint; and offers the thought that it would be alright for men to cry - they do not always have to indoctrinate themselves with the 'macho' social stigma that Western society has often generated.

### 3.2 The Lyrics of Contemporary Female Artists: Skunk Anansie - 'Little Baby Swastikkka

Skunk Anansie are a mixed gender rock group that scored several British chart successes in the second half of the 1990's. Their female (bi-sexual and coloured) front-woman, 'Skin' has often expressed her political and sociological views through her lyrics and songs, such as attacking social stereotypes like racism, certain forms of femininity, and certain philosophies. She has since left the band and begun writing and performing as a solo artist. At the time, Skunk Anansie were considered highly controversial, as their first record, 'Paranoid and Sunburnt', contained such song titles as, 'Selling Jesus', 'Intellectualise My Blackness', 'It Takes Blood and Guts to be this Cool but I'm Still Just a Cliché', and so on. This analysis will be upon the fourth song from the album, 'Little Baby Swastikkka'; an attack on racism and the society that generates it. (for full lyrics - see Appendix (ii))

Each verse of this song begins by asking who, or what, is the cause of this racism. In the first verse we are given the image of a wall with a small Nazi swastika graffito imprinted on it, and asked the question, 'Who put it there?' In the inlay card, the lyrics are printed with three 'k's' in the word swastika, further emphasising this racism by cross linking it with the acronym for the 'Klu Klux Klan' - an American white power collective. Later in this verse, it is resolved that, as the swastika isn't printed very high up on the wall, it must have been a child less than 'four years old' that drew it.

2       Who put the little baby swastikkka on the wall  
          Wasn't very high couldn't have been more than four  
                          years old  
4       That's who put the little baby swastikkka on the wall

Again, the next verse asks in this (almost patronising) manner that is heavily reminiscent of a nursery rhyme:

5       Who put the little baby nigger-head on the wall

And this is followed by the bridge:

10      You rope them in so young  
          So small, so delicate, so young  
12      Grown up in your poison

This raises the idea of an exterior influence having been promoting racism to perhaps their children, who have no idea that the way they are discriminating against coloured people is in any way offensive or unacceptable; indeed who believe that they are acting correctly.

Finally the song finishes with the lines:

19      Who kicked the little baby's head against the wall  
20      We kicked the little baby's head against the wall

This final statement changes the whole meaning of the rest of the song, suggesting that it is general society itself, as a whole that has sparked this racism. We are to believe that the little baby's head being kicked against the wall is the same little baby that sprayed the

racist graffiti, and hence finally it is the baby that has been discriminated against, since he or she innocently believes that this racism is the correct way to be acting.

The music for this song is heavy and aggressive, but still the singer often takes on that patronising, nursery rhyme delivery, and all of these aspects make it a definitive statement about the cause and effect of British racism being nurtured in the young of our society by the supposedly more mature and progressive older sections of society; parents, teachers, siblings, and inevitably, all of us.

## Conclusion

We have discovered through the course of this paper that for a commercial artist to remain successful, it is necessary for that artist to consistently alter their public image in order to attract new interest and remain 'original'. This public fascination with ever-changing role models is perhaps worrying and a precursor for social fragmentation. Innovation in the popular music sphere occurs when independent labels gain enough of a following to be able to promote and sell their products. Then the privately owned multi-national corporations will buy out said independent label, and with it, exploit the new innovative genre until it is bled dry and turned into a commercial commodity. At this point revolt and disgust from the new independents over the commerciality of popular music will inspire them to create the next innovative movement, only to be bought out yet again, and the cycle continues. Often these multi-national oligopolistic companies will use whatever tactics are in their power to create financial profit, no matter whether it detracts from the credibility of popular music or not; ever searching for the next market that has money to spend on records. As a cause of this industrialization and rationalization in the processes of the music industry's production of commodities, social stereotypes are formed and destroyed. Specifically, women are portrayed in the way that will make the company's product sell, thus sex is a key component. Often manufactured pop will result in groups of young females who uncover the majority of their bodies and allow the male 'gaze' to take full effect; but this also has devastating effects on the younger women of this world. As they begin to consider this unrealistic portrayal of women to define what is expected of them, they will often become self-conscious and try to mimic the images that stereotypical men are always raving on about in their sexist ways.

Recently, after British MPs attacked the British phenomenon in interactive television, Pop Idol, for treating physical image as more important than musical talent, it seems to be fitting that it ended up being the non-typical overweight female that won 2003's Pop Idol contest. As she was voted by the public, this reflects a shift in the public's taste from what is visually impressive to what is aurally impressive - a public expression that will hopefully reverberate in the mindsets of those males that dominate the output of the record industries. This ethos is reflected in the decision of British radio station, Virgin Radio, who have publicly refused to play any songs that could be considered 'manufactured pop', and Top of the Pops' upheaval and rearranging of their show, moving away from nearly 60 years of being Britain's most popular music program on terrestrial television. Alexis Petridis comments in the Guardian's Television section, 'In favouring this stuff [interviews, backstage chat - 'editorial content'] over music, the All New Top of the Pops seems to have completely misunderstood what is wrong with British Pop Music. In recent months, some British producers finally seem to have caught up with their US counterparts, and started coming up with pop singles that sound genuinely innovative and different. The runny boyband ballad and bouncy disco pastiche have mercifully taken a dive in popularity. Instead, we have the sexy, percussive rumble of Rachel Stevens's Sweet Dreams My LAX, Kylie Minogue's darkly minimal Slow, and Holly Valance's fantastic State of Mind, a record that finally manages to attach the grinding, synthesised noise of the short-lived, uber-hip "electro-clash" movement to a decent song. The problem is not the music, but the pop stars

themselves. Their records may have personality, but they don't. They are simply attractive, smiley conduits for the music their songwriters and producers come up with. Any hint of individuality is ruthlessly suppressed by vast PR machines'<sup>41</sup>

The overall argument here is that, although it is acceptable for popular music to be nothing other than a source of entertainment for the masses, there needs to be more of a shift in awareness of the fact that women have the right, and indeed have proven themselves worthy, to not just be considered, or even portrayed as, sex objects. Women should be accepted into the record industry as serious humans with serious ideas, and an equal opportunity to express their aspirations or chosen talent. It is, however, only women that can alter the way that women are represented and perceived in society, and thus it is imperative that women are given this liberty to formulate their own opinions and ultimately express their own views and emotions without fear of institutional ridicule. Moreover, since the creation of popular music is essentially a reflection of the current social and cultural trends, it should not be dismissed as a constant source of cultural insight, but instead should be regarded as a truly important key in helping us to understand, and criticise, the very same society that creates it.

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<sup>41</sup> Alexis Petridis – *The Final Countdown* – The Guardian, 24<sup>th</sup> November 2003





Appendix

(i). Portishead - 'Glory Box'  
(Go Beat, 1994)

1 I'm so tired  
Of playing  
Playing with this bow and arrow  
Gonna give my heart away  
5 Leave it to the other girls to play  
For I've been a temptress too long  
Just give me a reason to love you  
Give me a reason to be a woman  
I just wanna be a woman  
10 From this time  
Unchained  
We're all looking at a different picture  
Through this new frame of mind  
A thousand flowers could bloom  
15 Move over and give them some room, yeah  
Give me a reason to love you  
Give me a reason to be a woman  
I just wanna be a woman  
20 So don't you stop being a man  
Just take a little look  
From outside when you can  
So, a little tenderness  
No matter if you cry  
Give me a reason to love you  
25 Give me a reason to be a woman  
I just wanna be a woman  
It's all I wanna be is a woman  
For this is the beginning  
Of forever and ever  
30 It's time to move over  
It's all I wanna be  
I'm so tired  
Of playing  
Playing with this bow and arrow  
35 Gonna give my heart away  
Leave it to the other girls to play  
For I've been a temptress too long  
Just give me a reason to love you



(ii). Skunk Anansie - 'Little Baby Swastikkka'  
(One Little Indian, 1995)

1 Who put the little baby swastikkka on the wall  
Who put the little baby swastikkka on the wall  
Wasn't very high couldn't have been more than four years old  
That's who put the little baby swastikkka on the wall

5 Who put the little baby nigger-head on the wall  
Who put the little baby nigger-head on the wall  
The eyes were so big couldn't have been more than baby's scrawl  
That's who put the little baby nigger-head on the wall

You rope them in young  
10 You rope them in young  
So small, so innocent, so young  
So delicately done, grown up in your poison

Who put the little baby K's up on the wall  
Who put the little baby K's up on the wall  
15 They got them in a line I bet they wished they could've sprayed  
up more  
That's who put the little baby swastikkka on the wall

Who kicked the little baby's head against the wall  
Who kicked the little baby's head against the wall  
Who kicked the little baby's head against the wall  
20 We kicked the little baby's head against the wall



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