

# Question of gender in American rock music

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Master's thesis / Diplomski rad

2023

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište u Zagrebu, Filozofski fakultet**

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Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-05-09**



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Odsjek za anglistiku

Filozofski fakultet

Sveučilište u Zagrebu

DIPLOMSKI RAD

Question of gender in American rock music

(Smjer: književno-kulturološki smjer, amerikanistika)

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Ak. godina: 2022. /2023.

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## 1. Abstract and key words

Throughout history creative female voices have been silenced. From Mary Ann Evans, Mary Shelley, and Sylvia Plath, to Meg White, Kim Gordon, and Kim Deal, women's presence in the artistic world was always overshadowed and linked to men and their achievements. Is rock and roll music still almost an inclusively masculine domain because it reflects the society that still considers women to be less capable and less imaginative, or is the society still sexist because young girls are discouraged to pursue their ambitions and are raised hearing predominantly men's voices in the music industry? Or rather, are women still banished from it because of sexism that reigns in it or is sexism caused by their absence? This Master's Thesis addresses these and other related issues and explores how contemporary rock music answers them. The sources that will be used will vary from scholarly articles focusing on the depiction of women in mainstream media, performativity, male gaze and other concepts related to feminist and cultural studies to close reading of the lyrics of songs, interviews with various musicians and bands, and other sources in order to approach the question of gender in American music. After defining what rock music is and explaining its importance in American society, we are going to discuss the relevance of the question of gender in rock music. Finally, after defining and explaining main terms we will be using in the analysis, namely visuality, violence, and identity formation, we are going to analyze four contemporary rock albums that are written and performed by female artists. In this paper the terms "rock and roll" and "rock" music will be used interchangeably.

Key Words: rock and roll music, gender, cultural studies

## 2. Introduction

The importance of rock and roll music in contemporary American society is best summed up in the opening words of Lawrence Grossberg's article "The Politics of Youth Culture: Some Observations on Rock and Roll in American Culture": "The rise and visibility of youth culture in the United States after the Second World War is marked, most prominently, by the emergence of rock and roll" (104). Rock and roll music opened up a space where young people were able to authentically and creatively express themselves and voice their opinions, concerns, and ideas. He also emphasizes the importance of context, that is, the social dimension of rock and roll, to which he refers as a larger "rock and roll apparatus" through which the music is inflected. According to him: "This apparatus includes not only musical genres and practices, but styles of dress, behavior, dance, etc., as well as economic and political relations." (Grossberg, 104). Rock and roll has evolved from a musical genre into a lifestyle propagated by the people and the social context, and it continues to evolve, which is why it is so hard to grasp it into a single definition. Marion Leonard recognizes the difficulties of this enterprise, as the existing definitions are often problematic and incomplete. She provides the most complete and exhaustive definition of rock and roll music in the introduction to her book *Gender in the Music Industry* by comparing David Roberts, Sally McFall, Mark Bennett, and Bruno MacDonald's definition, that relates the beginnings of rock music to the 1950s and incorporation of the dissonant "blue notes" into the harmonies and lyrical structures of European music, to Richard Middleton's, who points out that, even then, rock music was more complex than that, as it encouraged experiments and "novelty gimmicks", which enabled rock music to evolve into various subgenres, such as punk, metal, and progressive rock (Roberts and al., 1998, Middleton, 1993 in Leonard, 3). She also enumerates the defining determinants that characterize it, from the instruments which are most commonly used, such as the electric guitar, bass and drums, distinctive type of performance, which is wild and untamed, to general song structures, lyrics,

and melodies (Leonard, 3). Another important element of rock music she recognizes are the codes of practice related to rock music, which include fashion trends, distinctive performances and visuals, as well as different cultural practices (Leonard, 3). She cites the studies of Harding and Nett, Chapple and Garofalo and others who discuss the importance of the question of gender in rock music and how it has generally been a masculinist culture, from its themes and lyrics to visuals and performances: “rock is created and performed by men” (Leonard, 1). Starting from this premise, this MA thesis will examine how women were negotiating their place within this culture historically and how they do it today, with the main focus put on the representation and treatment of women in rock and roll music. In order to approach rock music as an object of a academic analysis, we have chosen three criteria that correspond to the three aspects of any literary analysis, that are: its structure (visuality), its content (song lyrics) and its significance and cultural impact (importance of rock music in identity formation).

### 3. Importance of Rock Music

In her book *Music in Everyday Life* Tia DeNora argues that music is not just a form of entertainment or an art form but an essential component of everyday life. She emphasizes its social role and suggests that music can have an important impact on our mood, behavior, and social life. DeNora uses a sociological perspective to research how people use music to create and maintain social bonds, reinforce cultural norms and values, and construct their sense of identity. DeNora's book emphasizes the important role that music has on individuals as a tool for identity formation and self-expression, and on society in general. She also provides arguments for its place in academic studies especially in the context of American Studies. Furthermore, Widmer writes that rock ‘n’ roll is “one of few art forms that we can call genuinely American.” (73). However, in 1972 US vice president Spiro T. Agnew called rock music “unamerican,” as the lyrics of the songs, such as White Rabbit by the Jefferson Airplane or

Eight Miles High by The Byrds, are dangerous for the youth, as they advocate consumption of drugs and immoral behavior (qtd. in Densmore 251). This dichotomy is the basis for defining what rock music is. It is a product of American culture that was created as an opposition towards the dominant paradigms in the United States, focusing rather on the marginal and outsider groups in it. O'Brien also sees music not only as a source of entertainment but as a powerful political tool. She acknowledges its power to affect individuals on a mass level, by articulating themes and emotions that are at the same time personal and universal. Therefore, it is an effective indirect transmitter of ideas. Rock music can shape its consumers into a personality which the product is creating for them. Metalheads, punks, hippies and all other fans of rock music construct their identities in relation to the music they are listening and those who belong to it. Star and Waterman also point out stereotypes that are, unfortunately, a part of rock music as well, such as the portrayal of women as objects of desire and men as violent and tough (5). We will look more closely into these and other themes of rock music in the following sections.

#### 4. Importance of the Question of Gender in Rock Music

Rock music is undeniably an important instrument of articulation of ideas and emotions for the youth and for marginal cultures. It has always been perceived as liberal and progressive, however, when it comes to the question of gender, it demonstrates many problems, from hypersexualization, exclusion and even violence towards women. Chris Lezotte points out that race and class were not significant barriers to the development of rock and roll music, given that it originated from black people's music and was not an elitist culture. However, gender was a more complex issue that presented challenges (165). Deborah Harding and Emily Nett further support this claim in "Women and Rock Music", that is one of the first studies that treats the question of gender and women's position in rock music, rather than the socio-economical or racial issues. They do not only emphasize the importance of rock music in the context of

granting the youth a possibility to authentically express themselves but they also recognize the danger that this prospect poses, as the majority of the industry is male. From performers, producers, and managers to its target audience, rock music was from its very beginning male-oriented. Rock music is seen as a more masculine sphere since it's perceived as loud, defiant to authority and cultural norms, often profane and outspoken – something that is socially perceived as behavior more suiting men than women. Despite its liberal appearance, rock and roll music has undeniably always been a masculine culture, with little room reserved for the expression of women's thoughts and feelings. This problem is also evident in the studies that are written on this subject matter, for example, Hall's list of Rock and Roll founders did not include a single woman and most of rock and roll discographies and historiographies also exclude prominent female artists, or list them in subsection labelled "girl groups", which diminishes their importance and impact:

If women performers (or songwriters, DJs, managers, etc.) are only seen as exceptional because they are women, this justifies the relegation of women-in-rock to an obligatory chapter, where their contributions are acknowledged but are also portrayed as being a step removed from the history as a whole. (Gaar, 14)

In order to better understand the problematics of gender in rock music, the next section will be dedicated to the history of rock music, with special emphasis on female musicians and their experiences.

## 5. Historical Overview

Throughout history, women's accomplishments were neglected, downplayed, and excluded from science, sport, politics, art and other spheres of invention and creation. Rock music is no



exception to the rule. Even though the prototype of a rock and roll musician is a guy with a guitar, there is a long history of artists that were overshadowed by rock and roll stereotypes. One of these names is Sister Rosetta Tharpe. “The Godmother of Rock and Roll” was one of the first female musicians who challenged the established social patterns of gender, sexuality, and race (Subia 1). All rock music forerunners cite her as their muse – from Little Richard and Johnny Cash, who took inspiration from her unique style of singing, to Elvis Presley, Keith Richards, and Jeff Beck who imitated her distorted style of guitar playing (Subia, 1). Even the supposed inventor of rock music Chuck Berry has stated that his whole career has been one long Sister Rosetta Tharpe impersonation (Taylor 1). This section will provide a general overview of rock music history and a homage to female musicians whose legacy continues to be an inspiration for contemporary rock artists. In order to write this historical overview of rock and roll music, we have combined the research that focuses on significant female performers who O’Brien portrays in *She Bop I* together with the general historical overview of most important artists, genres and currents in rock music history. The reason why this is significant is because there are no other historiographies that include women’s contribution in rock music to this extent.

### 5.1. Roots of Rock and Roll Music

The end of the Civil War and the definite abolition of slavery in the 1860s caused numerous black people to move from the agricultural South to the cities in the North, bringing with them guitar music that, combined with other instruments, such as pianos and percussions, marked the beginning of what will in the future become rock and roll (O’Brien 10). The roots of rock and roll music, that is, blues, jazz, and soul music, shaped the contours of different rock genres. Musical entertainment was not closed to women; on the contrary, it was a part of a small number of career paths that women could pursue. However, their social status was inferior to those of

men in the same profession and closer to that of prostitutes (O'Brien 11). Blues artists such as Bessie Smith, Mamie Smith, Ma Rainey, and the guitarist Memphis Minnie were the "one-of-the-guys" type, who preferred male to female company and who smoked, drove cars and tried their hardest to outdrink and outperform their male companions, and sang songs about female sexuality and power. (O'Brien 18). In jazz music the number of male musicians surpassed by far the number of female acts who were often not taken seriously. That is why they formed their own bands, even though they were in most cases pressured to accentuate their physical features rather than their artistic quality, which can be seen from the fact that one of these groups was labeled "The Band With A Bosom" (O'Brien 31). Still, musicians such as Annie Ross, Anita O'Day, Billie Holiday, Mary Lou Williams, Ella Fitzgerald, the trumpet player Valaida Snow, and many others persisted in spite of this pressure and remained a part of musical legacy.

## 5.2. The 1960s and 1970s: the Emergence of 'Rock Chicks'

Only a handful of female musicians have managed to penetrate the musical industry on their own terms. One example of that is Mama Cass, a singer who was particularly harrowed by her self-image and who fought with incessive diets and regimes for most of her life: "When a woman's body is sold as sexual product and slimness as the most desirable image a girl can have, female performers inevitably focus on their weight. International fame and feeling vulnerable in the spotlight can take this obsession to extremes" (O'Brien 220). Despite the struggles she had with her self-image, Mama Cass is still considered to be one of the most important rock singers of the period. These decades were also marked by musicians like Dinah Washington, Nina Simone, and Etta James presaged the 1960s and the emergence of the somewhat derogatory term "Rock Chick", that is, the artists whose musical abilities are overshadowed by their physical appearance. This prolific and creative decade saw the rise of unconventional music that openly criticized the political decisions of the government,

especially the military involvement in Vietnam. Apart from the all-male big names such as Jimi Hendrix, The Doors, Eagles or Led Zeppelin, there were many female musicians whose importance is often understated. Janis Joplin was America's first female rock star and one of the most memorable vocalists of all time. She was highly influenced by blues, especially Bessie Smith with whom she felt a special connection to, she even stated that she thought she might be the singer's reincarnation. Like Mama Cass, she was also insecure in herself because of her self-image. Joplin's producer Paul Rothchild, quoted in *Love, Janis* by Laura Joplin, stated that:

Sexism killed her. People kept saying that she was just "one of the guys" . . . that's a real sexist bullshit trip, 'cause that was fuckin' her head around ... she was one of the women. She was a strong, groovy woman. Smart, you know? But she got fucked round. (369)

Social ostracization followed her from high school and college, and throughout her musical career she was bullied for her appearance and behavior. Joplin accidentally overdosed on heroin on October 4<sup>th</sup> 1970, founding the infamous Forever 27 club. Another important name of the period is Grace Slick, the front woman of The Great Society, Jefferson Airplane, Jefferson Starship and Starship and one of the most important figures of the San Francisco's psychedelic music scene. The lead vocalist of Jefferson Airplane was playing a housewife for the band, cooking and cleaning when she was not on stage and leading a bit more conventional lifestyle than Joplin, at least by the standards of the psychedelic 1970s. Stevie Nicks, "The Reigning Queen of Rock and Roll," always knew she wanted to be a performer, as she stated in an interview with the West Australian that she chose not to get married and have a family so she could lead a lifestyle of a true artist. Just like Janis and numerous other musicians of the period, she developed a substance abuse problem that put her health and her career in danger. Her professional career, which included two Grammys and the honor of being the first woman to be inducted in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, twice, and a successful solo career while not

playing with Fleetwood Mac still did not save her from being dubbed a “parody of herself”, as she was ridiculed for her image after gaining weight related to her drug problem. The “cool-tomboy” Maureen (Moe) Tucker of the Velvet Underground is another underrated musician who paved the way for female instrumentalists (O’Brien, 108-110). The talented drummer also had a successful solo career after the band broke up, proving she was more than just a passing name in the history of rock music. One cannot forget to mention the avantgarde artist Patti Smith, who was not only an acclaimed musician and performer but also a poet, a recording and a visual artist. The androgynous poetess connected literature and music in an unprecedented way, which is why she is considered to be one of most important rock and roll artists. As we can see, the physical appearance of female rock musicians has been in the foreground of their biographies from the very beginnings of rock music, as it will continue to be so in the decades to come.

### 5.3. The 1980s and the Decade of Music Videos and Male Chauvinism

One of the biggest parts of the 1980s in the music scene was the increasing popularity and demand for music videos. Music videos were made in order to promote the bands and their music and the arrival of MTV and VH1 made them an essential part of the music industry, rock and roll included. In the 1980s and in the early 1990s, music videos were perceived as a substantial cultural influence rather than mere promotional short clips. (Soukup, 77) This meant visuality became an even more important factor of music, as music videos were broadcasted non-stop on television. Cultural analysts, such as Lawrence Grossberg and Simon Frith, have contended that music videos present a visual portrayal of music, presenting a contrast of cheerful and enjoyable visuals, detached from distinct points of reference (qtd in Soukup 78). The 1980s have also seen a continuation of the original form of “Rock Chicks,” from Cher and Tina Turner to Pat Benatar, who maintained the image of the “Rock Chick” alive but adjusted

it to the decade of music videos (O'Brien, 121). Rock and roll continued to expand throughout the decades, becoming more heterogeneous and MTV and VH1 introduced new bands and new genres into the mainstream. This decade also saw the rise of some of the most chauvinist genres in rock and roll music, that is, heavy metal, glam rock, and punk. Heavy metal is a musical genre that emerged in the 1970s but that was popularized with bands such as Megadeth, Metallica, and Slayer in the 1980s and glam metal, a subgenre that describes the bands that were focused on looks and image rather than the depth or the message behind the music, followed. Some of the important glam metal bands are Guns 'n' Roses, Mötley Crüe, Kiss, Poison, and Twisted Sister. Both heavy metal and glam rock were dominated by men, while punk managed to develop into a genre that was not defined by gender: "By the late 1970s an unexpected space opened up within which women could discard rock's 'language' altogether. It was punk that proved to be both their inspiration and their nemesis." (O'Brien, 131). Punk is a genre of rock and roll that in many ways resonated with the very origins of this music: free expression and movement, onstage anarchy, and taboo subject matter make this genre one of the purest embodiments of the spirit of rock and roll. There was also a subculture within a subculture, a safe space inside the genre that women created for themselves to explore their emotions, sexualities, and the limitations it poses on them and their bodies. On the other side of the Atlantic, there was Poly Styrene, one of the first women in punk to make a record with her band X-Ray Spex, who inspired numerous artists, such as Kim Gordon of the Sonic Youth, Courtney Love of Hole, and many others, with her innovative style of singing and flamboyant, feminine, anti-blow-up doll appearance. In the United States, experimental artists Laurie Anderson and Danielle Dax also fought against the stereotypes of female musical incompetence in the domain of experimental rock and proved that women were more than just a pretty face on the band's album cover. As Dax put it:

With music I'm competing mainly against men, so for a long time I never built up those relationships you can have with women, I felt quite isolated. I'd go to studios and they'd say, "Who played this?" And I'd answer, "I played it all", and every time there'd be an incredulous look. Obviously, sexism goes on all the time and I get extremely annoyed about it but I have to stop thinking along those lines because it makes me so angry it almost stops me functioning. All I've done is had goals and tried to see them through. (O'Brien, 158).

One must also mention The Go-Go's, the first female band emerging from punk to achieve commercial hits who were mentoring equally important Rhoda Dakar of The Bodysnatchers, the female guitar heroine Chrissie Hynde of The Pretenders, The B-52s who had two female leads, and many more female acts who inspired musicians in the decades to come (O'Brien, 150). The 1980s were a decade that saw the emergence of various new genres of rock and roll music, who all embraced the rising medium of music videos that was often reflecting patriarchal themes and objectification of women. However, feminist musicians within these genres also used music videos as a platform to challenge gender norms, addressing issues of empowerment and equality. We will analyze the visual aspect of rock music videos in more detail in subsequent sections.

#### 5.4. The 1990s and the Frenzied Gender Debate

The 1990s saw the rise and popularization of many new genres, from grunge, embodied by Nirvana, Pearl Jam, Alice in Chains, and Soundgarden and indie rock, led by Pixies and Sonic Youth, as well as numerous musical *mélanges*, such as alternative metal bands such as Rage Against the Machine, ska punk band No Doubt and skate punk bands Green Day and Blink-182. But there is also a less renowned female scene that emerged in the 1990s. This decade also

saw super-grunge queens L7 arise from Los Angeles, a “female Pearl Jam”, Stone Zoo arose from Boston, and shoegaze appeared on the scene with Rachel Goswell from Slowdive, Ozean’s Lisa Baer, and Chan Marshall. There are also Courtney Love, Kim Gordon, Babes in Toyland, Kristin Hersh, Kim Deal, who all brought new themes into popular music, from abortion to rape and abuse, presented from a refreshingly raw female point of view. Another turning point in the period is the emergence of the Riot Grrrl movement. Riot Grrrl’s movement was a subculture that emerged in the 1990s and that was organized by young women artists, activists and bands such as Bikini Kill, Heaven for Betsy, Huggybear, Cheesecake, Lunachicks, Double Zero, and other Riot Grrl-related or influenced bands, and their proponents that connected feminism in theory and in practice:

From college campuses to benefit concerts and direct-action groups such as Women's Action Coalition (WAC), Women's Health Action and Mobilization! (WHAM!) and ACT UP, girls began to hone their own feminism, working alongside men at college radio stations, small record labels, in street theatre and in bands. (O’Brien, 161)

Like punk musicians, Riot Grrrl used the “do-it-yourself” technique, meaning that self-taught artists were teaching others about music and performing music but also how to film music videos, design album covers and flyers for the gigs. Their goal was to provide young girls with the means to have a voice in the punk scene that was male-oriented and man-dominated:

Music is an integral part of youth culture that makes it possible for girls to infiltrate male-dominated society,” said Riot Grrrl Chia Pet in an interview with Susan Corrigan in April 1993. “You're expressing something by your presence and it's communal. Everyone's right there with you. (qtd. in O’Brien, 163)

Riot grrrl movement believed that rock and roll music was an important aspect of youth identity and they fought for the inclusion of women in it by providing them a safe space on and off stage to participate in it. The importance of the Riot grrrl movement for women lays in the fact that it provided a platform for feminist expression, challenged patriarchal norms in punk, and encouraged women to join the rock and roll scene. Importance of their music shows lays in the fact that women became free to express themselves however they wanted, to play topless with different signs and messages written on their bodies with the goal of desexualizing the female body. Riot Grrrl inspired many women to perform, produce, and write music, even after the movement's dissolution, with new generations of female musicians emerging on the scene and citing them as their role models.

## 6. Rock Music Today

In the introduction to his book *21st Century Music* Aleksandar Dragaš states that, even though rock is no longer the dominant musical genre as it was from the 1960s to the 1990s, it still remains a prolific and creative music genre worth writing about (8). This is why the following sections will be dedicated to the exploration of the question of genre in the present moment. In the realm of contemporary rock music, a notable shift in power dynamics has emerged with the growing empowerment of women. Amidst an ongoing dialogue about gender equality and women's rights, the rock music scene is witnessing a gradual transformation, as more women navigate an industry historically dominated by men. This evolution underscores the complexities and challenges faced, revealing the persistent need for change while acknowledging the barriers that still exist. Contemporary rock female artists, such as Taylor Momsen from The Pretty Reckless, Halestorm, Against the Current, WILLOW, Maggie Lindemann, Royal & The Serpent, Dorothy, Arrow de Wilde from Starcrawler as well as the older generation artists' Avril Lavigne, Hayley Williams from Paramore and Demi Lovato's



new releases bring a strong female voice to the genre. Themes of song lyrics and musical videos that have been released lately are more open to freedom of female expression, from mental health issues and self-harm expressed by Chrissy Constanza in Against the Current's songs "again&again" and "that won't save us" and in Maggie Lindemann's "Different", Dorothy's "Black Sheep", "Rest in Peace", WILLOW's "Falling Endlessly", "Perfectly Not Close To Me", "Split", "WHY?", "<Coping Mechanism>", Crumb's "Gone" to queer experience with Arrow de Wilde and WILLOW who portray lesbian relationships in "She said", "Stranded", and "ur a stranger", "hover like a GODDESS", "<maybe> it's my fault". In the next three sections we will analyze four contemporary rock albums, which are all released in 2022, written and performed by female rock musicians from Los Angeles, that is, WILLOW's *<Coping Mechanism>*, Warpaint's *Radiate Like This*, Starcrawler's *She Said* and Dorothy's *Gifts From the Holy Ghost*. They will be analyzed according to three criteria that are relevant for the study of the question of gender in rock and roll music, that are, visuality, violence, and identity formation. First, we will explain these concepts and their relevance for the analysis, then we will implement them in the analysis of the albums.

## 7. Importance of Visuality in Rock Music

Female body was always assigned a decorative role in popular culture, with the goal of indicating sexual suggestion to its consumers: "A glamour girl immortalized through Pop Art in Warhol's repetition of blurred images; Monroe became the talisman for commercial sexual desirability." (O'Brien 211). The importance of consumerism in popular culture that Ariel Levy writes about in her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs* can be translated into rock music in the context of the sacred idea that "sex sells", which explains why appearance often overshadows musical quality of female artists. What Kim Gordon, Janis Joplin, Courtney Love, Meg White, Patti Smith and Stevie Nicks all have in common is the fact that they were more often seen solely

through the prism of their appearance, rather than creative content they produced. (Berkers 11)

Another instance of this can be noticed in the collective experience of queer musicians. Fear of publicly coming out demonstrates the importance that female musicians' sexuality and appearance has, as it was considered "a commercial suicide" (O'Brien 5). Women as the subjects of rock music feature in music videos that resemble softcore pornography such as Motley Crüe's "Girls, Girls, Girls" video, with girls dancing around poles in their underwear in a raunchy club (O'Brien 234) and on album covers, such as Queens of the Stone Age's debut album of the same name, Steel Panther's *Balls Out*, Deftones' *Around the Fur*, Blink-182's *Enema of the State*, the Strokes' *Is This It*, that feature images of women in poses and clothes insinuating sexual allure. The visuality of rock music is an essential component of its identity, and it plays a crucial role in constructing and reinforcing gender norms and stereotypes. The music industry has historically relied on images and aesthetics to market and sell music, and this visual culture has often objectified and sexualized women in ways that reinforce traditional gender roles and expectations. The use of the male gaze in music videos, album covers, and promotional materials has been a prevalent theme in rock music, and it has contributed to the marginalization of women from the genre. However, the visuality of rock music can also be a site of resistance and subversion. Many contemporary artists use their visuals to challenge gender norms and stereotypes. For example, some female musicians have used their album covers and music videos to show their creativity, rather than their physical appearance. The best example of this notion are the record sleeves and fanzines created by Riot grrrl members who tried to reappropriate the image of women in rock music by using childhood photographs from the band members, controversial images, and texts (Wald, 595). By rewriting the visual codes of rock music, these artists have opened up new possibilities for gender expression and challenged the limitations that have traditionally been placed on women in the genre.

## 8. Rock Music and Violence

From the analysis Harding and Nett conducted, apart from sexual appeal, another theme was abstracted from the lyrics and visuals of popular rock songs – violence. They have concluded that men often consider women as unreliable and dangerous and that, therefore, violence can sometimes be the only way to keep them under control (Harding and Nett, 65). Christine Hall Hansen and Randal Hansen have also remarked that rock music features a significant amount of sexual content and violence (211). They have conducted two studies that have showed that sexual and violent content significantly increase the appeal of the music (Hansen and Hansen, 25). Another form of violence over women is harassment from the critics and general public that female musicians experience much more frequently than men. Since it is often not explicit, music industry in most cases disregards it, which consequently normalizes this type of behavior (Coleman 121). Bethany Cosentino, the front woman of American band Best Coast, tried to tackle this problem by directly addressing the objectification and sexualization that she and other female musicians endure. She claims that they are more frequently criticized on the basis of their appearance, personal style, and behavior, neglecting the quality of their musical performance, which is in the focus when it comes to male musicians (Coleman, 123). Violence is also a very frequent theme of rock songs, one example of these being the lyrics of the Doors' song "Touch me" written by the band's guitarist, Robby Krieger, which were originally "Come on, come on, come on, now *hit me*, baby" describing the turbulent relationship he had with his girlfriend, only to later be replaced with "touch me" to avoid controversies (Densmore, 176-177). These are just some of numerous examples which show how women were treated in rock and roll scene. The theme of violence is important in the study of American rock music because it shows the ways in which gender is constructed and performed within this culture. One of the ways in which violence is present in rock music is through the image of hypermasculinity. The problem of this notion lies in discouragement of women to participate in this culture on their

own terms. Female musicians often deem it necessary to be categorized in rock and roll stereotypes if they want to be included in the scene. Women who have attempted to participate in rock music culture have also often experienced gender-based violence or harassment in much greater extent than their male colleagues, demonstrating the gender inequalities are a part of rock music culture. In the recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the connection between violence and gender in rock music. Many musicians and critics are trying to make rock music a more inclusive and diverse space. The theme of violence in the study of American rock music is significant because it shows the ongoing struggle to challenge and redefine traditional gender roles and stereotypes in music and society.

#### 9. Identity Formation: Transgressive femininity

Rock and roll music has played an important role in the identity formation of young people in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This can be explained by the fact that rock music addresses themes and problems that they can relate to, such as rebellion, self-expression, and social critique. Rock music has also often been linked to youth culture and subcultures, which can provide young people with a sense of belonging and community. Furthermore, rock music has been associated with various social and political movements, such as the 1960s counterculture and civil rights movement. For many young people, these movements provided a platform for social critique and activism, and helped to shape their own political and social identities. The role of rock music in the identity formation of young people is also related to the question of gender, as rock music has been associated with masculinity and male-dominated spaces, and has often reinforced traditional gender roles and stereotypes, despite its apparent liberal character. In fact, female musicians have often been marginalized or objectified, and have had to navigate a male-dominated industry and fan culture. As schools, parents and religion became less important in this context, it takes a more significant role in the life of young people. This

is not necessarily a good thing as popular culture, rock music included, is demonstrating numerous restrictive stereotypes and cliches. This can be exemplified in the two types of female musicians that the popular music industry puts forward. On the one hand, there is what O'Brien refers to as "The Marilyn Monroe Syndrome", the perception of women "primarily as man-pleasing angels, victims or problem personalities - rather than in terms of body of their work" (3-4). On the other hand, there are the androgynous women, who are desexualized and who have no distinguishable female attribute or qualities. The prototype of this category, Patti Smith, stated:

All through childhood I resisted the role of a confused skirt tagging the hero. Instead, I was searching for someone crossing the gender boundaries, someone both to be and to be with. I never wanted to be Wendy – I was more like Peter Pan. This was confusing stuff. (O'Brien 112).

This is only an example of female appropriation of something that has existed in rock music for a long time. Cross-dressing is a phenomenon that has been present through the decades of rock music's evolution. From Little Richard, Frank Zappa and Mick Jagger to Anthony Kiedis, dresses, smudged black eyeliner, and red lipstick had not only an aesthetic and comical role but were also used in order to convey powerful messages of inversion of rock and roll power paradigms. Bands such as Smashing Pumpkins, Beck, and Nirvana in the 1990s cross-dressed as a way of supporting and raising public awareness about the Riot Grrrl movement's anti-macho ideal of rock music, in the tradition of Fusco's "postmodernist celebration of appropriation" (O'Brien 273). Janis Joplin's former lover and musician, Country Joe McDonald, quoted in *A Star is Torn*, by Robyn Archer and Diana Simmonds (O'Brien, 99) stated that:

Joplin's struggle was one of identity and integration. Her masculine and feminine sides vied for attention: sometimes it was out-and-out war, sometimes her sense

of being a woman came to the fore, with her long, electrifying hair, her love of flamboyant, sensual clothes and the aesthetic sense with which she decorated her home. At other times she 'ran with the gang', outswearing and outdrinking the next man, proud that she could hold her liquor Texan-style. This duality expressed itself too in her bisexuality, two sides that were often out of synch. (O'Brien 104-105)

Women like Janis Joplin and Patti Smith in rock music often face a paradox, as they are expected to act like stereotypical rock stars but are put back into their place if they do not conform to certain gender rules imposed by society. However, rock and roll also offered young women a way to undermine the ideal femininity, the notorious "Angel in the House" and live their lives on their own terms, as rock and roll music represented an escape as a source of financial independence for those who did not want to be a part of the heteronormative capitalistic society. Using rock music as their medium turns them closer to the Victorian stereotype of the "Mad Women in the Attic" and offers them a possibility to escape the hegemonic narratives altogether. In conclusion, the role of rock music in the identity formation of young people is closely tied to questions of gender and reflects the ongoing struggle to challenge and transform traditional gender identities and stereotypes in music and society.

#### 10. Visuality in Contemporary Rock Music

Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze could be helpful for analyzing the representation of women in rock and roll music and for understanding the ways in which gender stereotypes and power dynamics can shape the production and consumption of contemporary rock music. In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey explains the concept of the male gaze as a way in which films employ a heterosexual male perspective. This means that women are typically

presented as objects to be looked at and desired by the male viewer. According to Mulvey, this is a result of the patriarchal society in which we live, where men are socialized to view women as objects of their desire. This leads to a power dynamic in which women are passive and objectified, while men are active and dominant. Mulvey's concept of the male gaze emphasizes the ways in which visual media reinforces gender inequality and objectifies women, while also perpetuating harmful stereotypes and power imbalances. Even though Mulvey's essay primarily focuses on cinema, her insights related to the women as objects of male gaze are applicable to the analysis of music videos, that are filmed with the goal of inciting desire:

The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire. (Mulvey, 10-11)

In rock music, women are for the most part more often the objects than subjects of music, or as Harding and Nett put it, "women and the roles they play, or are expected to play, in society have been characterized by men" (60). The concept of the male gaze can be applied to women in rock and roll music in a number of ways. In the early years of rock and roll, women were often portrayed in music videos and album covers as sexual objects, designed to appeal to a male audience (Harding and Nett 60). This reinforced traditional gender stereotypes and put forward the image of women as objects to be desired by men. Moreover, female musicians were frequently subjected to the similar ways of objectifying camera angles, close-ups, and other film techniques characteristic of Hollywood movies. These film techniques frequently highlighted the physical attractiveness and sexual allure of female musicians, rather than

focusing on their musical abilities or artistic contributions. However, many contemporary female musicians are attempting to redefine their role as women in rock and roll, using their music to express their own perspectives and experiences, instead of conforming to traditional gender roles and expectations. WILLOW's album *<Coping Mechanism>* demonstrates traits that challenge the male gaze. For example, in the music video for the song “hover like a GODDESS” WILLOW is shown in a masculine outfit, with short hair and barely any makeup, subverting traditional standards of female beauty. Her rather androgynous esthetics are in opposition to what Wald criticizes in her article “Just a Girl? Rock Music, Feminism, and the Cultural Construction of Female Youth”, that is, “the patriarchal infantilization and sexualization of girls” (596). The album cover features stereotypical rock music element, that is, a picture of an electrical guitar smashed into a television screen, and the music videos and visuals portray her as a protagonist that is loud, violent, disobeying cultural norms and conventional ideas or perceptions regarding the physical appearance of women, what Wald names “transgressive gender performance” (590). However, some videos, such as the one for the song “maybe it’s my fault” also feature several close-ups of her face and her posing in sexually alluring poses, which could be seen as reinforcing the male gaze. Similarly, the all-female group Warpaint’s the fourth album, *Radiate Like This*, also contests what Wald calls the “violence of heteronormative beauty culture” (596). The album cover reflects the general soft feminine aesthetics of the album, described by Lisa Wright as “clever, heady interplay; four voices weaving as one – are present and correct, this time the more icy edges are rounded off in favour of softness and a nurturing sense of femininity” (1). It features a close-up of the band members' faces, and the music video accompanying it, filmed in a similar style, shot in black and white with women of different races, nationalities, and statures as the central point of focus in each of them, that could both be interpreted as a way of subverting the male gaze by emphasizing their individuality and diversity of female beauty rather than their bodies.



However, the album also includes songs such as “Altar” or “Hard To Tell You”, which features lyrics that portray women as passive and unable to make decisions for themselves and that men are in control of them: “I’ve always said you open me like a flower/ Open me, open me/ You’ve always seemed to naturally/ Have that power, naturally, naturally.” Los Angeles indie rock band Starcrawler can be best described as a mixture of Black Sabbath and the Runaways, both in their visual and musical expression (Guardian, 1). In the case of their 2022 album, *She said*, there are some examples of the male gaze. The album features a cover of the members posing in a manner stereotypical of rock stars with the lead singer Arrow de Wilde in the middle, visibly differing from the rest of the group by her choice of clothing. Both on the cover and in the music videos, she is wearing pink girlish outfits that emphasize her femininity. Continuing the legacy of Gwen Stephani and Riot grrrl, contemporary artists like de Wilde have found innovative methods to enhance the representation of women in rock music by embracing their femininity. Concurrently, the music industry has identified these female icons, each with their meticulously crafted public image, as effective avenues to market their products to the younger female audience, connecting it with feminine identity (Wald 587). The same thing could be said of Dorothy’s 2022 album *Gifts From the Holy Ghost*. The album cover features artwork of Dorothy Martin that James MacKinnon describes as “the enigmatic neon demon” in his review of the album. Martin is the focus point of the videos as well, which feature many of heavy rock and roll’s imagery, such as electric guitars, leather, chains and dark makeup, continuing the tradition of the rock chicks. This could be perceived as indulgence to the male gaze, however, her physical appearance recedes into the background when she starts singing. Her strong vocals are similar to Janis Joplin, Tina Turner, Billy Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald, which she cites as her influences. In summary, while WILLOW’s <*Coping Mechanism*>, Warpaint’s *Radiate Like This*, Starcrawler’s *She said* and Dorothy’s *Gifts From the Holy Ghost* all contain elements that challenge the male gaze, they also demonstrate the ongoing challenges faced by female

musicians in the rock industry to be seen as more than just objects of male desire. This ambivalence arises from the dual nature of the mentioned albums. While they incorporate aspects that challenge the male gaze, which suggests a move towards more empowered portrayals of women, they also highlight the persistent hurdles encountered by female musicians in the rock industry. The artistic expressions and musical endeavors of modern female rock musicians cover a diverse array of practices, both within and beyond the confines of the dominant corporate music scene, highlighting women's contributions on various fronts (Wald 586). These musicians strive to transcend the role of being solely objects of male desire, reflecting the conflicted reality where progress and obstacles coexist within the representation of women in rock music.

#### 11. Violence in Contemporary Rock Music

The theme of violence is significant in this study because of its omnipresence in rock and roll culture. From the studies conducted on the topic, violence is one of the core motifs of rock and roll music, as the genre is inspired by controversial and taboo themes. However, as youth is susceptible to these stimuli, the representation of women as victims in rock songs can lead to a normalization of this phenomena outside the domain of rock music. Riot grrrls were one of the first to use their position as female performers to draw attention to this problem to a wider audience, with songs that openly talk about the violence that they experienced. When it comes to the acceptance of LGBTQ+ persons in the genre, rock and roll has been one of rare tolerant and inclusive spaces for them. Still, this does not exclude violence towards them. WILLOW is one of contemporary artist who openly talks about her relationships in public and portrays homosexual relationships in both her song lyrics and videos. When she officially came out as bisexual in 2019 on Red Table Talk, there were many negative comments related to her lifestyle choices. Two most popular comments on the mentioned video are:

“Believe in what you want, but don’t demonize monogamous relationships because you think that’s what ‘society’ wants you to do. Just because you have a platform to voice your opinions doesn’t mean it’s the only one. Live how you want but let others do the same.”

“Okay soooooo, does everyone get tested for STD's and HIV regularly? Just seems this would make the risk rate higher. Just asking.... “

As these comments show, both general public and people within the genre still reinforce traditional gender roles on artists.

Dorothy Martin has also experienced violence and is talking openly about it. She has confirmed that the song “Big Guns” is about leaving an abusive relationship in her 2022 interview with Matt Pinfield. In August 2020, Arrow de Wilde confirmed that she was sexually assaulted by a male stripper hired by the singer of the band the Growlers while they were on tour together in Australia, resulting in two members of the Growlers leaving the band. These examples prove that sexual violence is still present in contemporary rock music scene. Still, there are also instances of female musicians challenging gender stereotypes and carving out a space for themselves in rock music. These musicians use their music to express their own perspectives and experiences. One of the themes that is omnipresent in the lyrical expression of these albums is that of female empowerment. The lyrics of these songs openly address female experiences of rage, disappointment, disobedience, and revenge:

“Not gonna be the sad wife, babe (like the '50s)/ Why don't I switch it up, bad luck (on your whole life)/ Taking the power back, think fast/ You wanna build me up with your love, no, I'm good, babe.”

“Big Guns” (Dorothy, 0:13).

“Wrap you 'round my spinning wheel/ Run you over, see how it feels/ I like the way you try and hate me/ You know I'm rhinestoned up so you treat me like a baby/ I wish, wish it wasn't true/ But this whole time I've been a bigger man than you.”

“Roadkill” (Starcrawler, 0:39).

“One day I'll be dancing on your grave/ Taking it back the life you stole/ Every little piece you took of my soul/ Now I lay you down to sleep/ And I pray with the devil you rest in peace”

“Rest in Peace” (Dorothy, 0:31).

“If I were you, I would watch out/ Whatever you do, it better be true, I'm coming for you/ I'm washing out your mouth/ Whatever you do, it better be true, it better be true”

“BATSHIT!” (WILLOW, 1:05).

These musicians are taking rock and roll's lyrical stereotypes and turning the narratives around, making themselves the villains rather than victims. This shift of gender paradigms is another notion that connects all of these contemporary female musicians' lyrical expression and themes.

## 12. Identity Formation: Transgressive femininity

Simon Reynolds and Joy Press offer an interesting perspective on how women in rock music disrupt established gender norms:

Femininity is not a fixed set of characteristics for these artists, but rather a wardrobe of masks and poses to be assumed. So figures like Kate Bush, Madonna, Siouxsie Sioux and Annie Lennox shift between a series of female archetypes in a strategy of investment and divestment: using clichés without being reduced to them (...) (233-234).

This extract on female identity in rock music coincides with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity that argues that gender is not something that is innate but rather something that is socially constructed, learned, and performed by individuals (520). Butler's concept of gender performativity can be applied to this analysis in several ways. The performative dimension of rock music, including the theatricality of stage presence and the employment of costumes and makeup, can be perceived as a form of gender performativity. Musicians engage in gendered behaviors and expressions in order to convey certain meanings and identities to their audiences. This applies for their off-stage presence as well, as rock stars often incarnate their stage image in everyday life as well. Rock music has been questioning traditional gender norms and expectations since its emergence, as numerous rock musicians have used their platform to disrupt and subvert dominant gender narratives, which resulted in not only in broadening the range of ways in which gender can be expressed in the music industry, but also contributing to the emergence of novel cultural spaces in which non-traditional gender identities can be investigated and embraced. As the term "rock and roll" encompasses certain behaviors and worldviews, it has a significant role in the formation of identity of young people. This is why the question of representation is so important. Another common theme of all these albums is

the issue of mental health problems. Hysteria, trauma and melancholia are here called by their real names, proving that this highly controversial theme can be found even in the domain of popular music:

“The walls are talkin' and the voices in my head/ (They're screamin' out loud)/  
Fun fact, some days I just cry on the couch/ Put my whole life away on a shelf/  
I try to feel something, that's why I break everything/ (I'm screamin' out loud) /  
Fun fact, I'm so, so sick of myself/ My mind's a breeding ground for un-health  
/The walls are talkin' and the voices in my head/ (They're screamin' out loud)”

“<*Coping Mechanism*> ” (WILLOW, 0:12).

“I feel buried under my skin/ Out of the way, torture self every day/ What kind  
of better place is this? / I wanna be a different person.”

“Better Place” (Starcrawler, 0:33).

“There was a time I was willin' to die/ I stopped believin' in myself/ Heaven said  
that it wasn't my time”

“A Beautiful Life” (Dorothy, 1:33).

This means that young people can see that there are other people who are fighting the same problems as they are and are sharing their experiences with others, rather than ignoring them or diminishing their importance, as it was being done historically. Another important theme that

is addressed in these albums are what Wald names “the narratives of adult female sexualities” (587). Female sexualities can be pretty, ugly, forced, queer, but all in all real women are the protagonists of their own stories, not only the antagonists or objects, escaping what Wald calls “relentless eroticization of women’s bodies” (589). In these songs women are not objectified, they are referred to as “goddesses”, “dream lovers”, “my love’s”, “darlings”, and “ladies” and they are no longer perceived as the source of the fulfilment of men’s sexual desires, as they were for the most part in rock and roll’s history. LBTIQ+ themes are not a novelty in rock and roll music, but WILLOW, Starcrawler, and Warpaint address them in a very direct and open manner, in opposition to how these themes were approached to in the past. These artists are not only addressing taboo issues, such as mental health and sexuality, but are also showing young girls and boys how to escape from the norms, rules, and roles that the society is expecting from them, which means that rock and roll music still provides sanctuary to all those who do not or do not want to fit into what society deems as “normal” and “acceptable”.

### 13. Conclusion

We started this Master’s Thesis with defining rock and roll music and its distinctive characteristics, then we explained the significance of rock music and the significance of the question of gender in rock music. We further gave a brief summary of the history of rock and roll music, with special emphasis on female artists and their experiences and achievements which are for the most part excluded from rock historiographies. Then we discussed the importance and examples of visuality, violence, identity in context of the study of rock music. Lastly, we presented an overview of contemporary female rock musicians and we conducted an analysis of four albums released in the past year, based on the previously set criteria of defining characteristics of this type of music, in order to see if there is any difference connected to the question of gender today. We have concluded that contemporary rock music has introduced

some significant positive changes in relation to freedom of expression and in several aspects of the perception of women but that there is still place for improvement, especially in relation to violence and representation of women in the genre, as rock music still serves as a protagonist in the statements of women being discriminated. The rise of feminist approach to music critique has helped to draw attention to how women have been marginalized and objectified in rock music, and it will hopefully inspire a more inclusive and diverse approach to rock and roll in both academic and non-academic domain. As this format did not allow for an analysis of a larger sample of complex genres and subgenres of both American and non-American contemporary rock music, there is still place further research of these complex and interesting themes.



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