

Music can be seen as related to gender essay sample



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For many years discussions of sexuality were informed by a distinction between 'sex' and 'gender'. The sex of a person was judged to be 'biologically determined' and their gender to be 'culturally and socially constructed' (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner, 1988: 103). Gender roles are frequently based around the ideas that women are expected to be more passive and emotional and men more assertive and rational. "The first type of essentialism that can be found in this area [music and gender] is the idea that men and women 'express' some essential masculine or feminine forms of sexuality. The second type is that this in turn can be found manifested in the content of particular cultural products and practices." (Negus, p. 124). Jeffery Weeks argued that biology merely provides 'a set of potentialities that are transformed and given meaning in social relationships' (1986: 25). One of the reasons why gender has perhaps often been considered to be more 'social', and 'sex' in turn more natural, is that gender is usually more visible as a series of conventions about dress codes, expected public bodily behaviour, manner of speech and so on. Sex, however, is closely connected to 'sexuality', which has often been informed by beliefs that this should be a more 'private' affair. The distinction between sex and gender is therefore both ideological and misleading. Here I follow the approach of Weeks, who has argued that gender is the 'social condition of being male or female, and sexuality, the cultural way of living out our bodily pleasures and desires' (1986: 45). Is 'rock' itself an inherently masculine genre? One of the earliest attempts to start theorising the relationship between rock music and sexuality can be found in an essay written by Simon Frith and Angela

McRobbie (1978), in which they argued that rock operated as a form of sexual expression and as a form of sexual control.

Frith and McRobbie declared that, in terms of 'control and production, rock is a male form' (1978: 5). This argument was illustrated with reference of two different types of music: cock rock and teenybop. Cock rock is a term that was coined by feminists during the early 1970s to refer to male performers such as Mick Jagger, Roger Daltrey and Robert Plant, who were 'aggressive, dominating and boastful'. Women were often portrayed as subordinate in their songs and represented as sex objects on LP covers. The music was 'loud, rhythmically insistent, built around techniques of arousal and climax, the lyrics are assertive and arrogant...cock rockers' musical skills become synonymous with their sexual skills' (Frith and McRobbie (1978: 7). They believe that men dominate and control the production, reproduction and dissemination of rock music - and this is reflected in the music.

Comparing this with teenybop, which was judged to be consumed almost exclusively by girls, Frith and McRobbie found a contrasting representation of male sexuality based on softer ballad styles, and evocations of self-pity and vulnerability which encouraged female fantasies about being the partner of a singer.

Frith and McRobbie's argument was based on a narrow series of essentialist assumptions which privileged heterosexual behaviour. As Weeks (1986) has argued, 'male and female sexuality is far more varied and differentiated'.

Against Frith and McRobbie's argument that rock is male because it is controlled by men and therefore expresses a male sexuality, Robert Walser (1993) has proposed a more dynamic and historical approach by claiming <https://assignbuster.com/music-can-be-seen-as-related-to-gender-essay-sample/>

that rock has been actively 'made as male'. Focusing on a specific subgenre, heavy metal, he notes that heavy rock is not enjoyed entirely by male audience and neither does it communicate one type of masculinity. Walser continues to argue that heavy metal musicians do not simply express some essential maleness but instead are involved in what he calls 'forging masculinity'. This is not a type of unmediated cultural 'expression' but a conscious and deliberate 'strategy'. Walser argues that for most of its early history, heavy metal was actively made as male through a series of quite particular practices, strategies and tactics. Walser identified four such strategies that he found articulated in song lyrics, through the use of musical codes and music videos.

These he has identified as: 1.) exscription, which means no girls are allowed; 2.) misogyny, an anti-woman strategy which results in women appearing in songs and videos as mysterious or dangerous and as a threat to male control; 3.) romance, a cultural strategy whereby love, escape and fantasy provide a means of transcending everyday problems; 4.) androgyny, which is an ambiguous and contradictory strategy – while using elements of conventionally feminine clothing (lace, stockings and make-up), many hard rock musicians seek to assert their heterosexuality and are anxious that their androgyny should not lead to their sexuality being wrongly attributed as gay by fans, other musicians or journalists. I agree with Gottlieb and Wald when they argue that 'rock can provide a means by which women can actively create distinctive female subcultures' by using the example of Riot Grrrl.

The label Riot Grrrl typically applied to a US sub-genre of 'alternative' rock performed by female artists and groups that emerged in the early 1990s. <https://assignbuster.com/music-can-be-seen-as-related-to-gender-essay-sample/>

The Musical style appropriates elements of punk, hard-rock and grunge. Women musicians challenged the use of the guitar as a symbol of male power; the female voice was employed to challenge the macho assertiveness of rock – in particular through screaming and the adoption of a variety of vocal sounds that were used to ‘ evoke rage, pleasure and/or primal self assertion’ (Gottlieb and Wald, 1994: 261). As performers, women neither tried to become one of the boys nor played up to the traditional feminine image by seeking the heterosexual male gaze. Lyrically the songs dealt with ‘ taboo’ or ‘ private’ issues such as menstruation, incest, abuse, birth, motherhood and lesbian sex. Riot Grrrl paved the way for wider recognition of women artists and groups in alternative rock genres (whether or not explicitly ‘ political’ in nature). However, Gottlieb and Wald tempered their optimism with the observation that, despite the advances made by a few female performers, the ‘ on-going tradition of rock is still deeply masculinist’ (1994: 252).

After all, where are the female rock musicians who might challenge the success of Guns ‘ N’ Roses, U2 or REM? The conclusion that might be drawn from this writing on rock and sexuality is that rock is a genre that has been sexed in a very particular way, and as such its generic codes and conventions can present a formidable barrier to musicians who went to challenge and change them. One quote that agrees that rock is male, is made by Julie Burchill (1994) where she states that “ I know it’s a sexist thing to say, but women aren’t as good at making music as men – like they’re not as good as men at football. A girl in a dress with a guitar looks weird. ... It’s ok on the radio, because you can’t see them. Chrissie Hynde is

an exception. Very few of them are exceptions. And if they don't have a guitar, they become the dumb girl in front of the band. I'm not a great fan of girls in pop."

" There are just two types of female making pop music today – those blessed with good looks, and those who would perhaps be better served by an undercover visit to the local plastic surgeon. [Women rockers] are just indulging in ugly wimmin bleating. When ugly wimmin get left by some scrawny, spotty failed musician ... they blame the whole world but you couldn't give a shit because they sound so fucking whiningly horrible." Paul Lester (1992), This is a pretty harsh comment to make, suggesting that only pretty women can pull off being a rock musician. It should not be based on looks, after all, not a lot of male rockers are attractive. An example of a Riot Grrrl Group is Hole that were formed in 1989. They are not (considered to be) an original Riot Grrrl group – although there are musical, lyrical and attitudinal similarities. Their key albums are: *Pretty on the Inside* (1991); *Live Through This* (1994); *Celebrity Skin* (1998). Their musical output was often dominated by Love's (controversial) public image. *Live Through This* draws on punk, rock and grunge and it parallels with Nirvana's *Nevermind*. It utilises alternating soft verse/explosive chorus (cf. Nirvana).

This Riot Grrrl group has an abrasive and ironic/world-weary vocal delivery (as opposed to the stereotypically polished or sweet-sounding female vocal). It is made catchy with the use of melodic pop hooks and anthemic chorus. The lyrics synthesise the intimately confessional with the socially relevant (again, producing songs that operate both individually and collectively).

Powerful use of dynamic contrast at all levels – acoustic v heavy distortion;
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gentle low register v shouting/screaming high register; understated verse v powerful chorus. “ Riot Grrrl was essentially about empowerment but, wary of the bad press, the ‘ Riot Frrrumps’ and ‘ Feminazi’ tags, many women in bands distanced themselves from it in droves. Riot Grrrl ultimately was a fanzine-led flashpoint, a media rocket supporting the key-issue – a woman’s place in art and rock culture.” (O’ Brien, p. 164) It is not just rock that has been generically ‘ sexed’, but also disco and jazz. When writing about rock, Frith and McRobbie had argued that disco expressed a sexuality which was ‘ cool, restrained and understated’ (1978 : 19).

Basing many of their observations on the disco movie Saturday Night Fever, they wrote of the social relations of disco as ‘ traditional’ – girls dreaming of ‘ disco romance’ and boys dreaming of quick and easy sex (1978: 19). Yet disco music, far from being associated simply with traditional heterosexual conventions, is a genre that has frequently been linked with gay male sexuality. Richard Dyer argues that ‘ disco has been taken up by gays in ways that may well not have been intended by its producers (1990: 413). The apparent gayness of disco has been questioned by John Gill (1995), who has been critical of many of the assumptions that have been made about gay preferences in music (e. g. who says that gay men prefer opera, show tunes and disco?). Gill is particularly critical of the way that gay disco music has become something of a sexual stereotype among both gay and non-gay music fans.

I believe that although disco may not have been intended to be gay by its producers, it has still somewhat ‘ become gay’ with its cheesy music/lyrics, bright colours, fancy, over-the-top clothing etc. In discussing this he has <https://assignbuster.com/music-can-be-seen-as-related-to-gender-essay-sample/>

made some interesting observations on the sexing of musical genres and in particular about the 'sexing of jazz'. Gill has noted how the lesbian, gay and bisexual aspects to the lives and music of many prominent composers and musicians have often been excluded from jazz biographics. He has illustrated the point further by referring to the experiences of the gay jazz musician Gary Burton, whose experiences has led him to conclude that 'jazz's public image does not fit well with being a gay person' (1995: 75). This is an interesting observation because for many of its devotees jazz is thought not to have an 'image' (unlike the excesses of rock performance for example). Yet, as Burton observes from touring and performing; 'Many people still persist in wanting jazz to be played by fucked-up addicts and alcoholics, in cramped smoky clubs, while wearing garish clothes and silly hats and sunglasses and talking jive talk. I get complaints all the time about not looking the part' (Gill 1995: 75).

This argument about males being superior, has been going on for many years, long before rock, jazz or disco. As Susan McClary states with her argument that, much of the Western classical tradition can be understood as 'patriarchal'. She gives four such examples: 1.) The exclusion of, or writing out of history of, women composers and performers; 2.) The use of gendered terms (e. g. 'feminine ending' or 'feminine cadence'); 3.) The stereotypically gendered portrayal of female (and male) characters in opera; 4.) That sonata form itself plays out a narrative of 'masculine' domination. Adolf Bernhard Marx once stated in his lengthy discussion of sonata form that in sonata form the first theme is masculine and the second theme feminine. 'In this pair of themes...the first theme is the one determined at

the outset, that is, with a primary freshness and energy – consequently that which is energetically, emphatically, absolutely shaped...the dominating and determining feature. On the other hand, the second theme...is serving as a contrast, dependant on and determined by the former – consequently, and according to its nature necessarily, the milder idea, one more supple than emphatically shaped, as if it were the feminine to that proceeding masculine.’

The construction of gender that he suggested here would become one of his most influential assertions, one that has become both disturbing and deeply problematic. Berlioz also thought of the first expositional theme of his *Symphonie fantastique* as a construction of the feminine, not the masculine, as would apparently also be true, much later, of Wagner’s *Stegfried-Idyll*. Also with Mendelssohn’s *Overture to A midsummer night’s dream* from 1826, were the second theme was meant to evoke the feminine. Another use of the gendered term ‘feminine’ is also used to describe cadences. The general idea among musicians is that the feminine cadence is weak and the masculine strong. But this general idea is erroneous. The feminine cadence is often stronger than the masculine and is used in powerfully rhythmic music such as polonaises. To conclude, I do believe that rock has been actively ‘made as male’. However, I do not agree that only males can play rock, as I have witnessed myself many female rock bands sing and play equally (sometimes better) than male rock bands. Heavy metal may have been made in a very heterosexist manner, but it still might provide a number of possibilities for the making of an anti-sexist rock.

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