

Depiction of women in music

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



Stereotypes and Gender Identity in Popular Female Lyrics

You can learn a lot about what a culture or society thinks by listening to the music that they enjoy. Popular music in the United States is full of messages about women, what they want to say, and what others say about them.

Some lyrics are positive and empowering statements to encourage young women, and others are objectifying, misogynistic, and insulting to a woman's intelligence. You might not always think about what the lyrics to your favorite songs mean, but we are constantly bombarded with messages about how our society views women every time that we turn on the radio.

In *Respect: Women and Popular Music*, Dorothy Marcic uses Top 40 music with female vocals from the 1900s-1990s to illustrate, historically, how women have thought about themselves; their expectations, roles, and needs; about relationships; and about men. Marcic ascribes several archetypes of women to each decade. Lyrics sang by females in 1900-1929 tend to use the Dependent and Martyr archetypes. 1930-1939 is the Betty Boop-like Innocent and Victim archetypes. 1940-1949 uses the Wonder Woman (based on Carl Jung's Warrior archetype) and Jezebel archetypes. 1950-1959 continues the Jezebel theme, with the addition of the subservient Compliant archetype. 1960-1969 saw the beginnings of the Rebel archetype. 1970 to the early 1980s is Wonder Woman again, along with the Cynic archetype. The late 1980s use the Assertive and Sexpot archetypes. And the 1990s are the mature, Lilith archetype, named for Adam's mythological first wife who refused to be subservient and left him in the Garden of Eden.

Females did not sing of power in the 1920s, like they do today. Marcic writes that “ good women” in the 1920s were dependant, and that the message in many popular songs of that decade was “ Take care of me because I am helpless. I am Compliant. And if you hurt me, well, that’s what men do.” (Marcic, 14) This can be seen in the lyrics to Fanny Brice’s 1921 number ten song, My Man:

“ Two or three girls has he

That he likes as well as me

But I love him

I don’t know why I should

He isn’t good

He isn’t true

He beats me too

What can I do?

What’s the difference if I say

I’ll go away

When I know I’ll come back

On my knees some day”

My Man is a perfect example of how music can portray a society's beliefs; when Barbara Streisand sang the song in the 1968 musical *Funny Girl*, the original lyrics had become so shocking and unthinkable that the lines " He beats me too/ What can I do" were left out.

Compliant lyrics continued into the 1930s, where " women were innocent and saw themselves victims—they thought life was meaningless without a man and offered their love at any cost." (25, Marcic) The Betty Boop-like Helen Kane certainly portrayed this view when she sang " I wouldn't aspire to anything higher/ Than to fill a desire to make you my own" in *I Wanna Be Loved By You*. In fact, according to Marcic, codependency songs accounted for half of all female Top 40 songs in the 1930s.

The Wonder Woman archetype first shows up in the 1940s, when women experienced power while men were at war. But powerful women ran the risk of being viewed as a Jezebel, and with the end of the war returned society's desire for ultrafeminine, Compliant women. " Her role was to ask everyone else what she should be or do. She didn't take responsibility for her own destiny, instead giving up power to those around her...Never would it occur to her to have her own dreams, her own goals, her own plans." (Marcic, 64-65) In Marcie Blaine's *Bobby's Girl*, the singer can't think of anything better to aspire to than to be someone's girlfriend:

" When people ask of me

What would you like to be

Now that you're not a kid anymore

I know just what to say

I answer right away

There's just one thing I've been wishing for

I want to be Bobby's girl

I want to be Bobby's girl

That's the most important thing to me

And if I was Bobby's girl

And if I was Bobby's girl

What a faithful, thankful girl I'd be"

Another popular Complaint theme in the 1950s and 1960s was the " he's a creep, but I'll love him forever" (Marcic, 90) variety. This theme was especially popular in country music, such as Patsy Cline's Crazy and Tammy Wynette's Stand By Your Man, which told women that:

" You'll have bad times

And he'll have good times

Doing things that you don't understand

But if you love him you'll forgive him

Even though he's hard to understand

And if you love him

Oh be proud of him

‘ Cause after all he’s just a man”

And in 1968, Betty Wright sang:

“ The guys are gonna wander

Go out and play some times

But girls you must not let it get you down

Take this advice I give you just like a mother

You try to match your guy for two

Don’t try to do the things that guys do

Girls you can’t do what guys do, no

And still be a lady

Girls you can’t do what guys do, no

And still be a lady”

One of the worst examples of the Compliant archetype is Sandy Posey’s 1966 hit, Born A Woman, which gave voice to the terrible opinions that many women still held of themselves:

“ It doesn’t matter if you’re rich or poor

Of if you're smart or dumb

A woman's place in this old world

Is under some man's thumb

And if you're born a woman

You're born to be hurt

You're born to be stepped on, lied to, cheated on

And treated like dirt"

Though the lyrics seem unheard of now, the song clearly resonated with women at the time, as it was nominated for two Grammys and went on to be recorded by six more female artists.

Thankfully, the women's movement was beginning to take form in the 1960s, and there were plenty of songs that embodied their spirit of "rebellion, independence, social reform, revenge, and the demand for respect." (Marcic, 103) It was during this decade that Aretha Franklin demanded Respect, and Nancy Sinatra warned her cheating lover that These Boots Are Made For Walkin', and "one of these days these boots are going to walk all over you." Early on in the decade Leslie Gore made a rebellious stand for independence in her 1964 hit, You Don't Own Me:

" You don't own me, don't try to change me in any way

You don't own me, don't tie me down cause I'd never stay

Oh, I don't tell you what to say

I don't tell you what to do

So just let me be myself

That's all I ask of you"

This rebellious, Wonder Woman theme came into full force in the 1970s, when " the dominant music themes sung by women...were about assertiveness, cynicism, and power." (Marcic, 129) One song, Helen Reddy's Grammy Award-winning I Am Woman, remains a woman's theme song to this day. Finally, the message being sung by women is not that you must be " under some man's thumb," but that women are in fact capable of anything:

" I am woman, hear me roar

In numbers too big too ignore

And I know too much to go back an' pretend

' cause I've heard it all before

And I've been down there on the floor

No one's ever gonna keep me down again

Oh yes I am wise

But it's the wisdom born of pain

Yes, I've paid the price

But look how much I gained

If I have to, I can do anything

I am strong (strong)

I am invincible (invincible)

I am woman”

Another still-popular song, Gloria Gaynor’s *I Will Survive*, sends out the message that women are strong with lyrics such as “ Now I hold my head up high/ And you see me somebody new/ I’m not that chained up little person still in love with you,” and “ I’ve got all my life to live/ I’ve got all my love to give and I’ll survive/ I will survive, hey, hey.” Lyrics like Patsy Cline’s “ I fall to pieces each time someone speaks your name” and Sandy Posey’s “ If you’re born a woman/ You’re born to be hurt” are no longer easily found.

Female singers in the late 1980s were caught between “ the cry for Prince Charming, and...the growing realization that there was, in fact, no Prince Charming.” (Marcic, 160) The over sexualized and codependent lyrics were still there at times, but the Wonder Woman-type rebellious songs grew even stronger. Cyndi Lauper sang that *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun*—a far cry from Betty Wright’s *Girls Can’t Do What Guys Do*—and women had new anthems such as Donna Summer’s *She Works Hard For the Money*. Aretha Franklin teamed up with The Eurhythmics for another empowering anthem, *Sisters Are Doin’ It For Themselves*:

“ Now there was a time when they used to say

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That behind every—" great man"

There had to be a—" great woman"

But in these times of change you know

That it's no longer true

So we're comin' out of the kitchen

' Cause there's somethin' we forgot to say to you (we say)

Sisters are doin' it for themselves

Standin' on their own two feet

And ringin' on their own bells

Sisters are doin' it for themselves

Now this is a song to celebrate

The conscious liberation of the female state

Mothers—daughters and their daughters too

Woman to woman

We're singin' with you

The " inferior sex" got a new exterior

We got doctors, lawyers, politicians too

Everybody—take a look around

Can you see—can you see—can you see

There's a woman right next to you"

By the 1990s, women had stepped out of the Rebel stage, and many popular songs were about mature growth, and spiritual and self-awareness. Whitney Houston had touched on this theme in her 1986 hit, *The Greatest Love of All*, in which she sings, " The greatest love of all/ Is easy to achieve/ Learning to love yourself/ Is the greatest love of all." Mariah Carey reinforced that message in her 1993 hit *Hero* when she sang " When you feel like hope is gone/ Look inside you and be strong/ And you'll finally see the truth/ That a hero lies in you." The female-fronted rock group No Doubt took a more cynical look at things with *Just a Girl*, which expressed exasperation over female stereotypes:

" Take this pink ribbon off my eyes

I'm exposed

And it's no big surprise

Don't you think I know

Exactly where I stand

The world is forcing me

To hold your hand

' Cause I'm just a girl, little ' ol me

Don't let me out of your sight

I'm just a girl, all pretty and petite

So don't let me have any rights

Oh...I've had it up to here!"

Near the end of the decade girl groups like the Spice Girls promoted " girl power" and Destiny's Child had a string of empowering hits such as Independent Women Part I and Survivor.

By 1996, women's music was finally outselling that sung by men. (Dickerson 1998) Although some singers, such as Britney Spears, continued to rely on Compliant, child-like, Codependent, and over-sexualized themes, " the late nineties was the first time songs about strength outnumbered the other categories." (Marcic, 197) Lyrics sang by men, however, are a different matter. Although women have gained the right to vote, entered the workplace, and fought for equality over the past century, a staggering amount of male pop singers and rappers continue to sing insulting, degrading, and misogynistic lyrics. In recent years we've heard R&B singer Akon " try to find the words to describe this girl without being disrespectful," to which he must have given up, for it's followed seconds later by " Damn, you'se Sexy Bitch"; and Eminem has rapped about abusing his wife and other women countless times, such as in 2010's Love The Way You Lie, in which he threatens " If she ever tries to fucking leave again/ I'mma tie her to

the bed/ And set the house on fire.” In Queen Latifah’s 1994 Grammy Award-winning rap, U. N. I. T. Y., she proclaims:

“ Every time I see a brother call a girl a bitch or a ho

Trying to make a sister feel low

You know all of that gots to go

I don’t want my kids to see me getting beat down

By daddy smacking mommy all around

You say I’m nothing without ya, but I’m nothing with ya

A man don’t really love you if he hits ya

This is my notice to the door, I’m not taking it no more”

Her rap was meant to stop women from buying into that misogynistic message, but that message has yet to let up. Many rappers continue to insult and treat women as sexual objects in their rhymes.

Some female musicians in this new millennium have tried to give men a taste of their own medicine. Pop singer Ke\$ha was especially brash in her 2010 hit Blah Blah Blah:

“ I don’t really care where you live at

Just turn around boy and let me hit that

Don’t be a little bitch with your chit chat

Just show me where your dick's at"

R&B singer Ciara takes a different approach and attacks double standards in her 2007 song Like a Boy:

" What if I

Had a thing on the side

Made ya cry

Would the rules change or would they still apply

If I played you like a toy

Sometimes I wish I could act like a boy"

However, these songs don't seem to be making any changes. Rapper Jay-Z did apologize in recent years for writing misogynistic lyrics, but the amount of degrading lyrics in rap music has not died down.

Perhaps a better way to combat the hate towards women is the resurgence of empowering and self-love songs that has occurred within the past two years. You can't seem to go five minutes without hearing a song on the radio about learning to accept yourself. The lyrics aren't necessarily targeting women, although the majority of these songs are sung by females. They are reminiscent of Christina Aguilera's 2002 hit, Beautiful, in which she assures the listener that " You are beautiful no matter what they say/ Words can't bring you down, oh no." Pop singer Katy Perry recently scored a hit with the empowering Firework, as did Lady GaGa with her song Born This Way, which

tells the listener that “ We are all born superstars” and that you’re beautiful in your own way, “’cause God makes no mistakes.” Disney Channel star Selena Gomez’s current kid-friendly hit Who Says is also very much in this vein.

Over the past 100 years we have heard a lot of opinions about women through the songs that they sing. Women have gone from portraying themselves as Dependent, Innocent, Compliant, Martyr, Victims in the first half of the 1900s; to the Assertive, Rebel, Wonder Woman of the 1970s and 1980s; to the mature, and full of wisdom Lilith archetype that many lyrics portrayed in the 1990s and today. But no matter how strong the lyrics that women sing are, they continue to be attacked by insulting and sometimes misogynistic lyrics by male pop artists and rappers. This tells us that although women have fought so hard for equality, our society does not always think of men and women as being equals. Our society still has many misconceptions about how a girl should look, act, and be, as Madonna proved in her 2001 song, What It Feels Like For A Girl:

“ Girls can wear jeans and cut their hair short

Wear shirts and boots ‘ cause it’s okay to be a boy

But for a boy to look like a girl is degrading

Do you think that being a girl is degrading?

Strong inside but you don’t know it

Good little girls, they never show it

When you open up your mouth to speak

Could you be a little weak?

Do you know what it feels like for a girl?

Do you know what it feels like in this world?

Hurt that's not supposed to show

And tears that fall when no one knows

When you're trying hard to be your best

Could you be a little less?

Do you know what it feels like for a girl?

Do you know what it feels like in this world?"

Women have made progress, but our society's music proves that many people continue to view women as weak, as No Doubt cynically suspected in the 1990s with Just a Girl. There are things that our culture still expects of women that it does not expect of men, and women continue to be treated as sexual objects in lyrics in a way that is rarely turned around on men. But it's not impossible to a change society's way of thinking, as evidenced by the drastic change in women's lyrics from the 1920s to today. Helen Reddy's lyrics from 1971's I Am Woman still ring true today:

" I am woman watch me grow

See me standing toe to toe

As I spread my lovin' arms across the land

But I'm still an embryo

With a long, long way to go

Until I make my brother understand

Oh yes I am wise

But it's a wisdom born of pain

Yes, I've paid the price

But look how much I gained

If I have to I can face anything

I am strong (strong)

I am invincible (invincible)

I am woman"