

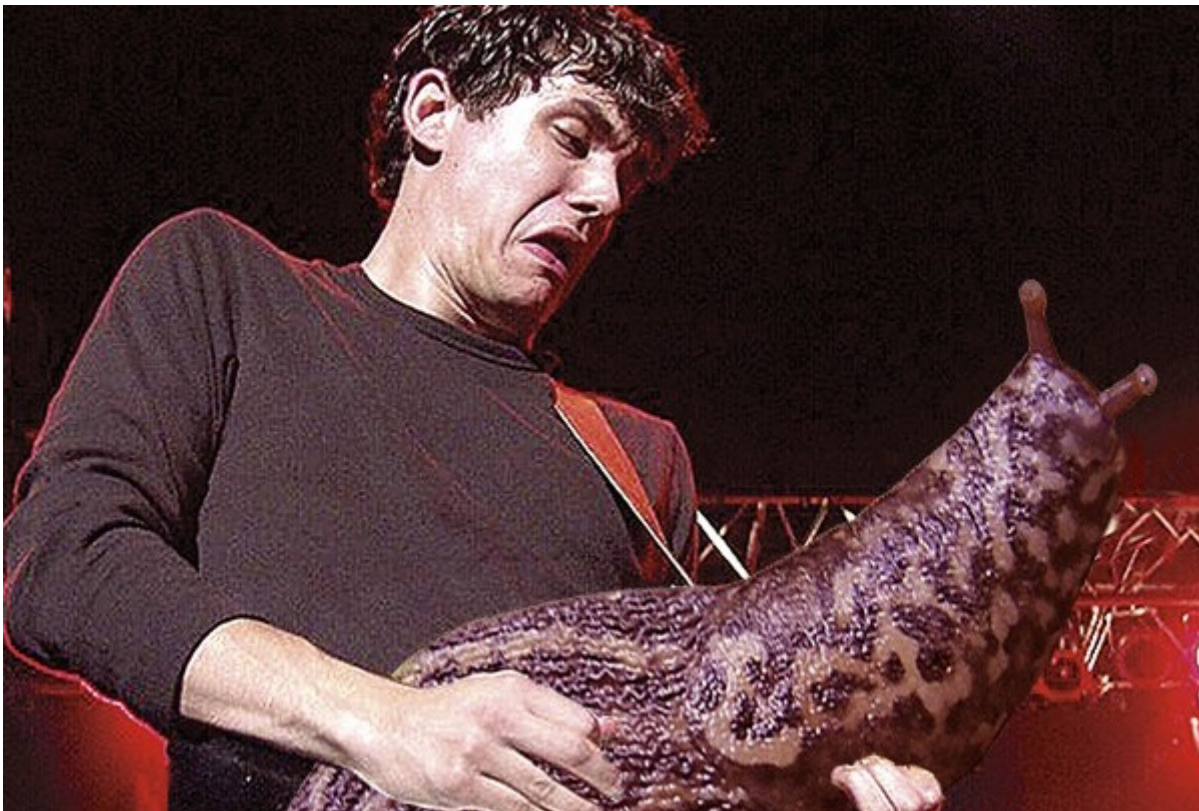
Playing Like a Girl

by Pii and Galia Kollektiv

A few months ago, we came across an ad at our local practice space in which a band was looking for a guitarist and saw fit to state that they were looking for “males aged between 17-22 only”. We rather facetiously posted the ad to female guitarist magazine *She Shreds*' Facebook timeline, mocking the idea that the ability to strum could be hindered by excess oestrogen. Predictably, our social media friends joined in attacking the inherent sexism of such a suggestion. However, the more we thought about the role of gender in shaping popular music, the more we had to concede that no matter how misguided, the young lads who had posted the ad had a point: there was definitely such a thing as 'playing like a girl'.

The phrase is appropriated from Iris Marion Young's essay on the phenomenology of female motility, “Throwing Like a Girl”.^[1] In this, Young tackles the embodied experience of femininity. Young notes that analyses of the way females use their bodies point out differences between this and male comportment, yet fail to account for the origin of this difference. At the same time, theories that emphasise the social construction of gender tend to avoid including the body in this process: the body remains a site of physical difference, where sex and gender can be separated into distinct categories. In light of this absence of a theory of the formation of gendered bodily comportment, Young uses Maurice Merleau-Ponty's conception of phenomenology to propose that “the bodily self-reference of feminine comportment [...] derives from the woman's experience of her body as a thing at the same time that she experiences it as a capacity”.^[2] For Young, it is not only the inhibition of certain modalities of the body that limits young girls' ability to practice the spatial and physical skills that go on to definite masculine comportment. It is also the positive affirmation of feminine comportment that encourages girls to perform their gender correctly by reinforcing a self-perception of fragility and immobility.

Young's theory of the formation of gendered bodily experience has been empirically substantiated in recent experiments such as the one featured in the BBC's 2014 episode of *Horizon*, “Is Your Brain Male or Female?”, where people were asked to set the angle of the incline they thought a baby could descend. The babies were not consistently dressed in compliance with their assigned gender, and when people thought the babies were female, they made the incline less steep accordingly.^[3] Nevertheless, Young ends her essay by suggesting that further attention might be devoted to finer movement and “less task-oriented body activities, such as dancing”.^[4] It is the aim of the current essay to devote this kind of attention to the specific area of playing music, with a special focus on popular music and especially the electric guitar.



This essay could easily have been called “Why There Have Been No Great Women Guitarists”, following in the footsteps of Linda Nochlin's enquiry into the dearth of women artists in the canon of Western art.^[5] In an article in *The Washington Post*, David Segal cites the Great Kat, a.k.a. Katherine Thomas, one of the few female technical guitar virtuosos, famed for her speed metal version of classical music, as explaining the scarcity of fellow female shredders with the fact that women lack the discipline

to practice.[6] But looking at Thomas' argument in context, there is more to her rant than a simple essentialism. Elsewhere, she expounds:

Women guitarists don't want to get off their LAZY BITCH ASSES and practice their balls off! Women are not INTERESTED in competing with guys. They start these little bands with other women because THEY CAN'T HACK IT! They're in their tiny little non-threatening groups that will NEVER EVER SCARE THE CRAP OUT OF MEN. You know why? Because they're SCARED of what guys will think if they get TOO DAMN GOOD. Well, I'll tell you what the guys will think. They'll say, "You're a ugly dog. We don't want to have sex with you anymore. We hate your guts." [7]

Beneath the bravado lies a sincere claim about the dilemma facing a woman who betrays her role as an object by asserting mastery on an object external to her.

Kim Gordon writes arguably more eloquently about this dilemma in her biography, *Girl in a Band*. [8] Asked by Dan Graham to write about music, she rejected the obvious choice of writing about women to focus on male bonding, which ended up being not only part of her essay title, but also an early name for her subsequent band, *Sonic Youth*.

Guys playing music. I loved music. I wanted to push up close to whatever it was men felt when they were on stage together - to try to link to that invisible thing. It wasn't sexual, but it wasn't unsexual either. Distance mattered in male friendships. One on one, men often had little to say to one another. They found some closeness by focusing on a third thing that wasn't them: music, video games, golf, women. Male friendships were triangular in shape and that allowed two men some version of intimacy. In retrospect that's why I joined a band, so I could be inside that male dynamic, could be inside that male dynamic, not staring in through a closed window, but looking out. [9]

We will return to this account of the male dynamic later. For now, we can assert that at least in some ways, there has been distinct progress in social attitudes towards what women can and cannot do. Recent debates surrounding feminism and transgendered people have even gone so far as to lay open the question of the biological definition of the category 'women' beyond the confines of academia. [10] And yet often the vocal denouncement of much gender stereotyping serves only to remind us of its continued predominance. The internet overflows with lists of the sexist attitudes that female musicians have to deal with, from the assumption that they are technically ignorant to the idea that they must be at the music shop or venue to support a boyfriend. [11] But the inhibition of female musicianship begins earlier than these scenarios. Even if we accept that there are few if any physical limitations on the musicianship of the those assigned the gender of women, by the time a female musician has to contend with shop assistants and sound technicians, much has already been determined about what she plays and how she plays it.



According to a study of gender typed instrument preferences conducted as recently as 2001 in Australia, these preferences can be found in children as young as five years of age.[12] Whereas the drums are perceived to be masculine, for example, girls tend to play the piano or the violin. [13] However, the gendering of musical training extends beyond the school curriculum. Whereas female musicians are often trained classically as soloists, the boys who end up dominating the music scene populated by such bands as the young male indie group mentioned at the start of this essay often learn to play from other boys or men in less formal contexts. It is this difference in education that, we would argue, crucially determines the gender roles that continue to shape popular music.

Women are certainly far from excluded from popular music. There are many roles in which it is common to see female artists. Singing has a long history as a legitimate feminine activity and it continues to draw a fair share of women. The popularity of classical piano training with little girls easily accounts for the many female keyboard players encountered in popular music, and the way in which simplified synthesizer refrains are incorporated into many songs makes the instrument attractive even to those who are late comers to the field and may not have trained as children. The relative ease of playing a bass guitar adequate to the requirements of popular music equally explains the stereotype of the female bassist, stretching from Carol Kaye to Kims Gordon and Deal. By contrast, the electric guitar continues to be dominated by male players. Women strumming on the acoustic guitar have been a stalwart of folk, for example, particularly to accompany singing. Yet it is quite hard to come up with a good Hendrix equivalent of a guitarist known for her shredding or innovative style, recent attempts to revise the six string canon and acknowledge the contribution of nineties female alternative bands notwithstanding. There has been much writing about normative representations of sexuality and subversive performances of gender in music, but when it comes to the technical side of musicianship, these issues fade out of the conversation.[14] In a recent book on alternative guitarists, only three out of 26 interviewees are women, Kim and Kelly Deal and Lydia Lunch.[15] The few exceptions prove the rule: role models are few and far between for the aspiring female guitarist or drummer.

Certainly, women have responded creatively to these stereotypes: the women of punk for example subverted the feminine display associated with the position of the singer and used the genre's rejection of musical mastery as a critique of the patriarchal framing of this mastery. However, these subversions often left intact the role divisions that they sought to undermine, and it remains the case that while one can think of examples of women playing most instruments, even in mixed bands, it is quite hard to think of an inverse example to the paradigm of male musicians backing a female 'muse'. From Bo Diddley through Prince to Chain and the Gang, there are a few examples of men backed by female musicians, but women are seldom the musical force in a band where the male frontman is the focus of an equivalent to the feminine display expected of female lead singers rather than the composer in control of the music.



Lucy Green's *Music, Gender, Education* goes a long way towards explaining the origin of these specific roles and their perpetuation today.[16] Green traces the evolution of norms of feminine display in music from antiquity to present day instruction. She attempts to outline the ways in which ideas about gender or 'delineations' as she calls them, inflect the reading of 'inherent' musical meanings. For Green, feminism can go too far in challenging notions of musical autonomy and insisting on the social construction of meaning in music. For her, this would "raise delineated meaning to a level which virtually obliterates the symbol-free status of inherent meanings, giving the appearance that delineations are somehow lodged in the intra-musical syntax of even absolute music".[17] We see no reason to accept Green's caution or the classical concept of an autonomous, absolute music, because it is impossible to know what meanings musical intervals, tempos and chord progressions might have outside of a given socio-historical situation. But there is much in Green's research into the history of gendered delineations that we can use to understand the cultural mechanisms that have prevented women from dominating the area of musical activity in question.

Green addresses the predominance of keyboards and non-electric guitars in female musicianship as arising from the domestic context to which much women's training has been confined.[18] The relative quietness of plucked strings and the seated position required by the piano have allowed these to be considered appropriate, especially in terms of their role as accompanying singing, a musical endeavour reassuringly sited in the body and requiring no mastery of an external tool. Musicianship for women is a paradoxical act in which the subject performs her subjectivity at the same time as she is constituted as an object through the male gaze. The audience does not derive pleasure from appreciating the performance of technique, but from the collapsing of body or body-image and technique into one. To these considerations we might add the relative ease of controlling a girl's activities when she is seated at home at the piano, as opposed to gallivanting with who knows who playing in a group.

But there is more to the prevalence of female soloists over group players. Green ascribes the limited opportunities afforded to women instrumentalists before modernity to the centrality of the church in organizing the field of music.[19] With the increased technical demands brought about by the advent of polyphony, the self-directed training that allowed women to participate in music at both professional and amateur levels was foreclosed, while cathedrals, churches and universities took over instruction in the complex composition and playing skills that music from the fourteenth century onwards demanded.[20] The limiting of women's access to instruments that could be unwieldy, produced a high volume or required technical complexity was also a result of the way in which their 'boisterousness' might interfere with the 'sweet mildness' of women.[21] Nuns were amongst the few women who could play music in ensembles where their performances did not interrupt any notions of femininity. Outside this very specific context, women have primarily progressed in classical music as soloists. Since they cannot make their gender invisible, women's performances are forever judged as either suffering from feminine

shortcomings, expressing some kind of femininity as a specific aesthetic or overcoming femininity by displaying virtuosity comparable to male playing.[22] As a consequence, it is in a sense easier for female musicians to operate as 'exceptional talents' than as players in groups or orchestras, where their participation has also been perceived as economic competition, on top of threatening gender divisions. As a soloist, a woman can either affirm her femininity through bodily display (Green cites the example of the marketing of violinist Vanessa Mae, standing in water with an unplugged electric violin as paradigmatic of the 'sexy women pretending to play instruments' trope) or transcend it, not escaping feminine delineation but being seen to rise above it. As Green writes:

The greatest level of interruption to patriarchal definitions of femininity caused by women instrumental performers occurs perhaps with the rank-and-file woman player [...] She cannot so easily appeal to the autonomy of the inherent meanings of her playing as a form of compensation for the interruptive delineations of her instrumental control; nor can she retrieve a relatively affirmative feminine display.[23]

This is why reeling off a list of important female instrumentalists doesn't really get to the heart of the problem. Looking at the limitations imposed on women by the gendering of musical roles must extend beyond a reassessment of the canon.

Green devotes a long section of her book to women composers and the challenges they continue to face, but we would argue that in popular music, it is not composition that most defines the exclusion of women, but improvisation. There is, of course, a growing scene of experimental free improvisation in which women are thriving. However, the training of young female musicians weighs against this aspect of playing, and it is only by struggling against this classical training that women often find their way into popular music. Green notes this matter in the context of jazz:

Dahl reminds us how heavily jazz has relied on its sub-cultural community for training, especially with reference to improvisation, which has until very recently been available nowhere but among the musicians themselves. The overwhelmingly male make-up of these musicians, and the venues and the working conditions of jazz have all militated against women's access to training.[24]

Green goes on to document the effects that these attitudes and conditions continue to impart on the classroom, with girls often excelling early on at the kind of rote training expected by the early years curriculum and boys frequently acquiring skills outside formal training in peer groups or from older male relatives.[25]

What these boys learn as a native tongue, women often only access as a second language, a missing piece of information that has to be studied artificially to enter the realm of popular music. The kind of learning by osmosis that the boys encounter forms the basis of what Kim Gordon describes as the triangular male version of intimacy. It is reiterated in countless accounts of women's exclusion from the lingua franca of popular music, both written and anecdotal. Viv Albertine, for instance, writes in her biography:

I don't want to use the same old twelve-bar blues chord progressions that all rock is based on. I can't anyway, I don't know the formulas. [26]

Many women who have come through the formal education system of classical piano training, as is so often the case with female musicians, are not even aware that there is a formula to improvisation. Men just seem to magically know which notes to play when, working together as a unit. Where female socialization is often structured through dyadic relationships grounded in talking, normative male bonding is a group affair, extending from the football pitch to many areas of life. It is this pattern of group interaction that is most unavailable to women. Improvised music is just one of the many forms that the third thing takes around which a shared identity coalesces. Women are at times added to this basic unit in supporting roles that conform to these parameters:

Just as the keyboard has been an exception to the rule about size and volume in classical music, so have the electric keyboard and keyboard synthesiser in popular music. These instruments have been played quite commonly by women popular musicians, who have merely moved over to them from the piano. so much so, in fact, that keyboard synthesisers are sometimes associated with femininity, or effeminacy.[27]

But where they attempt those instruments not aligned with femininity and reject the roles assigned to them by history and society, they have to contend not only with the judgment of their listeners, who find their gender interruptive with regard to the performance, but also with their own experience of a conflicted identity. Thus, "[w]hen girls avoid the drums, it is not just because of stereotypes or conventions concerning musical roles, but because of the performance-related musical delineations of a girl drummer that act back to interrupt not only the listeners' experience of her drumming but also her own listening experience of her own drumming".[28] This effect, we would argue, is exacerbated by the need to come up with music on the spot, as one is required to do in improvisation, where the musician

cannot experience herself as a vessel for the composition of another (man), but must take responsibility for her own voice, ceding her position as an object.



For Viv Albertine, as for many of the punk musicians of her generation, the inaccessibility of this mode of expression leads to a quest for a new language. Under the tutelage of Keith Levine, she searches for her own voice as a guitarist:

We meet a couple of times a week in my bedroom, which is the large double room at the front of the house, and Keith says, 'We're not going to bother with chords and scales and all that shit, Viv. I'm going to teach you how not to play guitar.' But I want to learn chords! How am I going to be able to write a song if I don't know any chords? Keith only has three rules: always start with the guitar in tune (he has to tune it for me), always have clean hands, and never go more than three days without playing. When I'm alone with the guitar, I experiment and try to recreate the sounds of animals and other noises. This is how I build my guitar style from scratch, from a starting point of no chords, no twelve-bar blues chord progressions, and no scales.[29]

There is a lot to admire in this DiY ethos, and it has indeed gone on to inspire many women to find the confidence to demand a place within popular music that might have seemed otherwise unattainable. But perhaps we will not be free of the limiting effects of gender until we cease looking for exceptions, subversives and outliers. It may well be that there will only be no such thing as 'playing like a girl' when mediocre indie bands can safely search for mediocre guitar players without really having to consider their gender. This is perhaps similar to Linda Nochlin's rebuff of the suggestion that one should recognise a distinct 'feminine' style of art in order to counter the inequality of the art canon. But, as Nochlin argues, the only quality of 'feminine art' is its relative anonymity and weak position within hegemonic art history, rather than a positive articulation of a critical female position.[30]

From the question of gender division in relation to popular music we can draw a few broad conclusions. First of all, it is clear that the social production of music, and of culture in general, cannot be treated simply as the relationship between objects or technologies and the body. This relationship, which is the mastery or embodying of skill, is always situated in a particular environment. Iris Marion Young examines how gendered stereotypes are internalized and performed through the body in a physical environment (the perception that men have better navigation skills than women, for example). Rather than existing as a neutral site, according to Young, the body is shaped by its social uses and designations: one trains one's body to behave in a particular way, to strengthen certain muscles or emphasise certain abilities. To add to this important process of the embodying or internalization of gendered social roles, it is also vital to look at the environment in which these interactions take place. The space surrounding the body is always already embedded within particular power relations: bodies operate on objects and objects enable certain physical attributes within a habitat where particular conditions make encounters possible. Girls play the piano at home, often in the middle class living room, or at school – both environments of surveillance and policing. Compared to the electric guitar, the piano itself is an expensive and immobile instrument, which prevents players from accessing other, less regulated spaces where noise and unruly behavior are instrumental in achieving the bonding of male groups of musicians playing together. In a city with very few practice spaces, the lone male punk band that operated in our home town when growing up was envied by all for securing a public bomb shelter as a free rehearsal space that occasionally doubled as a party venue and living quarters. Similar stories accompany the birth of every successful male band in history, from the Beatles to Guns and Roses, and it is important to note that these space are not domestic or institutional: they are dirty, noisy and often

subterranean, as opposed to the “tiny little non-threatening groups” that women socialize in, according to the Great Kat.



The spaces through which the gendering of music finds its articulation are also important because they are tied in with notions and structures of gendered labour. Lucy Green describes the emphasis on singing by female musicians as a kind of an embodiment of the logic of ownership and spectatorship: women transform themselves into objects that emit sound, to be listened to and looked at. This performative unification of the worker and the tool of her work is interesting not only because it seems to frustrate the creation of Kim Gordon’s ‘third thing’ that male musicians bond over (the technological object that sits between them) but also because it opens up further interesting questions in relation to the relationship between work, gender and music today.

According to Theodore Adorno’s essay “On the Social Situation of Music”, contemporary music is always caught in a dialectical tension. It is both the clear product of the alienated logic of the commodity market extended to the sphere of cultural production and an expression of “the exigency of the social condition and [a] call for change through the coded language of suffering”. [31] In other words, it is part of the social organization that makes us suffer (capitalism) and a beautiful demand to end this suffering. In this essay, Adorno completely rejects the division between ‘serious’ and ‘light’ music and instead proposes different criteria to assess the critical success of a particular musical piece. This success is measured by the ability of the musician to perform the ideological role of bourgeois cultural commodity designated for modern music and at the same time to offer some resistance to it. Adorno’s objection to jazz is well known but his reasoning in this essay is interesting: he sees in jazz a reflection of the paradoxical nature of the capitalist commodity, which on its surface promises personal liberation but at its heart is built on the same rationalized industrial production and exploitation as all of the culture industry. The personal freedom and strong individuality of the jazz performer “conceal the commodity character and alienated manner of production of this music”. [32] In musical terms, argues Adorno, this

uncritical dialectical tension results in that fact that under the improvised embellishments lurks the constant and oppressive beat of the military march band.

Adorno does not write about jazz's less urbane and sophisticated cousin – Mississippi Delta blues – but in many ways blues offers a completely different solution to his problem. After all, blues is, if anything, the clearest expression of a “coded language of suffering”. Instead of being structured around a contradiction between personal freedom and rationalized cooperative production, through its form, blues only enhances and even enjoys the oppressive nature of alienated labour. There is no illusion of freedom here but instead the pleasure and meaning of the songs emerge from their perverse adoption of the logic of work. Blues songs make the oppressive work of slaves in the cotton fields and their suffering beautiful and therefore, one can argue, offers a more critical trajectory than the jazz that Adorno writes about.

To go back to our question about the social character of contemporary music production and its relation to gender, the skill based bonding of the male musicians around an external object seems to belong to a mode of labour that is no longer prevalent in the west. This resembles forms of socialization that might emerge around a process of manual labour (and it is not surprising that many archetypal male bands, from Sabbath to the Stooges, were formed around the factory experience). In this sense, holding on to these aesthetic formulae, is like repeating and inverting Adorno's contradiction between the condition of production and the content of the song, the cultural commodity. Songs are today produced under post-Fordist precarious conditions and organized through an emerging ‘sharing economy’ and decentralized social media. But the content of the songs and the manner in which primarily male musicians play belongs to a previous mode of work.

This contradiction is even more glaring when we consider the spaces in which music is produced in large Western cities today. Practice spaces in spare rooms, garages or basements have all but disappeared from city centres through the tidal wave of gentrification. Storage for large amps and multiple instruments is hard to come by and expensive and most importantly, the precarious nature of work makes it much harder for groups of musicians to commit to the intense, quasi-military training that requires long hours of coordinated labour. In a way, the social conditions of contemporary music production today are ‘feminised’: casualised, performative in nature and often leading to solo performances rather than to the dynamic of a group performance. The impressive array of effects intended to support and inflate the sound of a lone guitarist is clear evidence of this. But if the laptop karaoke that dominates the current scene – Dan Deacon or John Maus might be good examples – is a reflection of the conditions of precarity that produce it, it might be interesting to consider the possibility of an alternative mode of music making that might react to them more critically, perhaps a more inclusive group sound that both responds to and undoes the isolated tapping of fingers on laptop keys at urban cafes, a collective process adequate to the post-industrial age.

[1] Young, Iris Marion, “Throwing Like a Girl” in: *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

[3] *Horizon: Is Your Brain Male or Female?*, BBC 2, 2014. The program actually tried to offer support for both sides of the nature vs. nurture debate, but for limitations of space this essay cannot go into the details of the claims and other experiments brought up in the program.

[4] Young, Iris Marion, “Throwing Like a Girl”, p. 45.

[5] Nochlin, Linda, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, in: *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988.

[6] Segal, David, “No Girls Allowed?”, in: *The Washington Post*, 22.8.2004, available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A19175-2004Aug20_3.html [accessed 26.4.16].

[7] Molenda, Michael, “She Who Must Be Obeyed: The Great Kat”, in: *Guitar Player*, 19.8.2005, available at: <http://www.guitarplayer.com/artists/1013/she-who-must-be-obeyed-the-great-kat/16797> [accessed 26.4.16]

[8] Gordon, Kim, *Girl in a Band*, London: Faber & Faber, 2015.

[9] *Ibid.*, pp. 102-3.

[10] See for example the numerous blogosphere debates around celebrities like Laverne Cox and Caitlin Jenner versus writers like Germaine Greer and Suzanne Moore, for instance here:

<http://radfemage.tumblr.com/post/90062171370/a-reply-to-a-reply-on-a-laverne-cox-quote> [accessed 6.6.16]

or here: <http://flavorwire.com/544701/the-disturbing-trend-of-second-wave-feminist-transphobia> [accessed 6.6.16]

[11] For example, this list from *The Huffington Post*: Guthrie, Steph, “Infuriating Things People Say to Women Musicians”, *The Huffington Post*, 9.9.2013. Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/steph-guthrie/sexism-in-music_b_3573435.html [accessed 25.4.16].

[12] Pickering, Samantha and Repacholi, Betty, "Modifying Children's Gender-Typed Musical Instrument Preferences: The Effects of Gender and Age", *Sex Roles*, Vol. 45, Nos. 9/10, November 2001.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 629-630.

[14] For example, Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie's comparison of 'cock rock' and 'teenybop'. Frith, Simon and McRobbie, Angela, "Rock and Sexuality", in: *Screen Education*, 29 (1978/9), pp. 3-19.

[15] Todd, David, *Feeding Back: Conversations with Alternative Guitarists from Proto-Punk to Post-Rock*, Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2012.

[16] Green, Lucy, *Music, Gender, Education*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 132.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 59.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 65.

[20] *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 59.

[22] *Ibid.*, pp.98 - 101.

[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 80-1.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 73.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 215.

[26] Albertine, Viv, *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes. Music, Music, Music. Boys, Boys, Boys.*, London: Faber & Faber, 2014, p. 173.

[27] Green, Lucy, *Music, Gender, Education*, p. 75.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 186.

[29] Albertine, Viv, *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes. Music, Music, Music. Boys, Boys, Boys.*, p. 167.

[30] Nochlin, Linda, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?", 1988. p. 147.

[31] Adorno, Theodor W., "On the Social Situation of Music", in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. p. 393.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 430.

Back