An Exploration of Hatred in Pop Music

An Exploration of Hatred in Pop Music:

Viva Hate

By

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Dedicated to Ronald George Richard Collins, 1926–2021.

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INTRODUCTION

My daughter, Emily, like most eleven-year-olds, I suppose, is very good at pointing out my failings. In the last few weeks, for example, she has said to me:

You say things without thinking (guilty – but I like to think I'm charmingly spontaneous)

You think everything I do is good (not guilty – but maybe I'm overly diplomatic sometimes)

You hate so many songs (Umm…)

This latest character assassination really got me thinking. True, I am passionate in my opinions of music, whether they be positive or negative, but do I really *hate* some songs? My response to Emily was 'I *dislike* a lot of songs, yes, but I wouldn't say I *hate* them.' But is this actually true? To answer, I will point you to the reason she dropped this particular bombshell on me in the first place. When we're watching TV and the adverts come on, instead of spending five minutes or so being bombarded with the latest and greatest items from the world of commerce, I have a flick through the music channels. And, as you probably know, there are significantly more of these now than in the 'old' days, where MTV (which still played music) and VH1 (which stuck largely to 'oldies') ruled the roost. During these five-minute journeys through the 20-or-so channels, I usually find the following: 50% are on ad-breaks; 49% are songs that I decide, after a maximum of 5 seconds, I have no interest in spending any time on, and that one remaining golden per cent is a song that I like and want to leave on. So, after a few advert breaks, Emily comes to the (quite reasonable) conclusion that I hate the majority of music. I mean, I get that it seems this way, but it's not

the case. Honestly. Granted, I have very strong feelings about what I dislike in the music world (and yes, there are a *lot* of songs that I dislike), but I also have very strong feelings about what I *love*, so it all balances out, right? True, I get unnecessarily annoyed by the paint-by-numbers lyrics and male-gazey videos served up by the aforementioned music channels, but I also get an incredible thrill from other songs. I'm writing this in a room where I currently have Nine Inch Nails on my stereo (yes, I still have a stereo, and do occasionally favour it over Spotify linked up to laptop speakers), partly for research (see Section 3), but also for motivation, as, much to the disgust of my wife and daughter, NIN played at a teeth-rattling volume helps me get the words down. I'm surrounded by books—many of them about music—but also by my CD collection (yes, I still have one of these, too). As someone whose formative years were spent in the late '80s, when a CD player cost about a month's wages, and a single disk cost about a week's, CDs will forever have a special place in my heart, never mind that charity shops and boot fairs can't give them away for free these days. In my collection, I probably have about 700 or so, and I have a relationship with each and every one of them that I'll never have with my Spotify playlists or downloads. Some have been bitter disappointments, those albums I spent hard-earned Saturday job wages or pocket money on only to find they were unlistenable tripe (I won't name names); others are so-so; others are good; others are great; and others I *love*. *The Queen is Dead*, *This Year's Model*, *Discovery* (Daft Punk), *The W*, *Pinkerton, Post*, *The Love Below/ Speakerboxxx*, *Blue*, *Electro-Shock Blues*, *Abbey Road*… I could go on. I genuinely *love* these albums and they make me feel very positive emotions. Isn't it natural, then, to experience the *opposite* emotions from other music? Some have written that the opposite of love is actually indifference, rather than hate, because by hating something we are still relating to it (Mann, 2013: 1999; Kelly, 2005: 96), but I find myself unable to be indifferent to music I passionately dislike. So, if I *hate* certain songs, I'm still relating to them. That, somehow, feels right to me. Every song that comes on the radio or on music TV that

I have a strong negative response to feels like a missed opportunity to me. I'm aware this is likely just some deep-set bitterness that I'm not the one getting hundreds of millions of downloads, but I always find myself thinking: 'you've got this platform, so why not do something with it' when I hear lyrics such as Megan Thee Stallion's 'Body-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody/ Ody-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody (Mwah)/ Body-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody/ Ody-ody-ody-ody-ody-ody', Mod Sun's 'Grab the whisky, take a sippy/ Sometimes I'm hella picky/ Like when I'm pullin sticky out the zippy', or Red Hot Chili Peppers' 'K.I.S.S.I.N.G./ Chicka chicka dee/ Do me like a banshee/ Low brow is how/ Swimming in the sound/ Of bow wow wow.' Songs can genuinely change how we see the world and influence political, social, and sexual attitudes (see Section 1), but some artists choose to do, well, something else. I'm aware, of course, that artists don't *have* to do something special with their work, and also that playing it safe with 'I want to dance', or 'I like fun' lyrics means bigger sales as no particular group is being alienated, but that doesn't stop me getting annoyed. Or angry. Or hate-filled. Szanto says that 'hatred typically involves an asymmetric power relation [and is] directed towards those towards whom one feels powerless and is yet dependent upon' (Szanto 2018: 456). Indeed, I am dependent on musical artists to create the music I *love*, but that also means I'm powerless to stop them creating music I *hate*. So, unfortunately, hate is a part of my musical life, love it or hate it (witticism intended). And it's the focus of this book. Brogaard notes:

> 'The term "hate" has a multiplicity of meanings. When asked informally what we mean by hate, we often cite extreme versions of other emotions, such as strong dislike, stomach-churning disgust, dehumanizing contempt, or all-consuming resentment. While our everyday characterizations of hate for the most part lack exactitude, it is true that "hate," in one of its senses, is synonymous with "strong dislike." […] [This is] the sense that most of us have in mind when we say that we hate being put on hold, waiting in doctors' offices, getting a flat tire [etc.]'
> Brogaard, 2020: xii

So, Emily, perhaps I only have a 'strong dislike' for the vast majority of music that comes on TV. I think that's preferable, as 'hate' is such an ugly word. Indeed, we're about to find out just how ugly, so do brace yourselves.

Brogaard goes on to observe that hate

> 'has a wide and narrow sense. In its narrow sense, it attributes malevolence or evilness to a person for her perceived wrong- or evildoing […] In its wide sense, hate encompasses both narrow hate and contempt […] Although contempt is not simply the result of filtering out narrow hate's raw anger, it can be seen as a kind of distilled hatred. Contemners—those who have contempt—are typically colder, calmer, and more callous in their attitude toward their target than haters.'
> Brogaard, 2020: xiii

As well as malevolence, throughout this book we will also be looking at the other emotions that lurk under the umbrella of 'hate', including vengeance, self-loathing, and, indeed, contempt.

However, this isn't a book that examines what is broadly known as 'hate music', defined by Messner et al. as 'a medium used to spread intolerance, bias, prejudice, and disdain for particular "groups" held in low esteem by certain segments of society […and] to label, devalue, persecute, and scapegoat particular groups of people—namely minorities [usually associated with] racist skinhead and neo-Nazi music…' (Messner et al., 2007: 513). The aim, instead, is to examine other types of hate that can be found within mainstream popular music lyrics, including hatred aimed at political parties, other artists, ex-partners, the self, and hatred within artists' own families.

This book will analyse lyrics, sound, music videos, album covers, and author biography along the way, exploring a range of artists' works, from Little Mix to Nine Inch Nails, Doja Cat to N.W.A, and Taylor Swift to Pussy Riot. Split into three sections *'Girl Power?: Misogyny, male-gaze, and objectification in popular music'*; '*Fuck 'em and their*

law: Popular music and hatred of authority'; and *'Home is where the hate is: Hatred of self, family, and (former) loved ones'*, over the coming pages, we will see how artists have directed hate at each other, their families, their critics, the police, politicians, the government, and themselves. And for those of you who aren't overly familiar with the work of Morrissey and are wondering about the book's subtitle, 'Viva Hate' is the name of the former The Smiths man's debut solo album. My declaration of 'Long Live Hate' on the front of a book with my name on it might not go a long way to disproving my daughter's theory that I hate a lot of music, and I do feel the need to state that I'm not advocating hatred in terms of anything outside the musical realm (although, as a devoted Spurs fan, I have expressed my hatred for Arsenal on the terraces on a few occasions). However, whether we like it or not, hate is everywhere. And seeing as song lyrics are reflections of real life, it's no surprise that it's common in them, too. Not to the extent that 'love' is, of course (being the most commonly used theme in popular music lyrics in every decade since the 1960s (Hsu and Xu, 2017), but enough to be found in well over 1,000 song titles and in an incalculable number of lyrics. And that's just the *word* not the overall expression of the emotion. Even songwriters we wouldn't associate with 'hate' have written hateful songs. Rogovoy states about Bob Dylan that '…as much as [he] came to be known as a writer and singer of protest songs, love songs, and breakup songs, he basically invented and broke the mold of "hate songs" [which include] "Like a Rolling Stone," "Ballad of a Thin Man," and "Positively Fourth Street." (Rogovoy, 2009: 71) Then there's John Lennon, the man that wrote 'All you need is love' writing lines like 'And you think you're so clever and classless and free/ But you're still fucking peasants as far as I can see' or destroying Paul McCartney on 'How do you sleep?' So, long live hate **in** music, as it's been the driver for many a great song. But let's not condone 'hate music' itself.

SECTION 1

GIRL POWER?
MISOGYNY, THE MALE GAZE, AND OBJECTIFICATION IN POPULAR MUSIC

Jones and Davies observe that misogyny in popular music has been present ever since 'doo-wop ruled the airwaves' (Jones & Davies, 2017: 13) in the mid-to-late 1950s and is still prevalent in today's music, with Newland pointing to Kanye West's lyrical assertion that 'one good girl is worth a thousand bitches' and Drake's 'you used to always stay at home/ be a good girl' as recent examples (Newland, 2017: 15). Although in modern times, a great deal of misogynistic language is to be found in hip-hop where 'there is an undeniable chunk of the genre which delights in denigrating women' (Spiers, 2017: 138) and extreme metal, which 'is dominated by men [and where] sexist and sometimes overtly misogynistic language is commonplace' (Cloonan & Garofolo, 2003: 91), we can see such behaviours across most genres of popular music. If we compare, say, the 1961 Dion song 'Runaroud Sue' with his song 'The Wanderer' released in the same year, we see some real differences concerning attitudes toward women. Both songs are written from a male narrator's perspective and are about the sexual behaviours of men and women, but whereas 'The Wanderer' gleefully speaks of the narrator's lothario lifestyle where he seduces various women as he moves from town to town, 'Runaround Sue' is very critical of 'Sue' who is doing the same, enforcing 'the ultimate expression of the ancient and stupid belief that it's okay for men to sow their overrated oats but women have to wait for Prince Charming to get their rocks off.' (Altrockchick, 2016) Such lyrics may seem tame now

when compared to something like Cannibal Corpse's song 'Fucked with a knife', where 'they unambiguously catalog [sic], from the protagonist's perspective, the rape, genital mutilation, and murder of a woman, associating this with her own sexual pleasure' (Cloonan & Garofolo, 2003: 82), but they are still on the spectrum of double standards, sexism, and misogyny that has permeated the music industry for decades and continues to do so.

And misogyny isn't just to be seen via the lyrics of make artists, as gender inequality is rampant across the entire music industry. 'In lyrics, videos, album artwork and the music industry's everyday operations, women see themselves attacked, excluded, stereotyped, fetishised and viewed purely through their impact on the male ego.' (Jones & Davies, 2017: 1) In early 2020, 'the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative at the University of Southern California released a study on gender inequality in the music industry which revealed some staggering statistics. At the time, less than three percent of producers were women. Less than 13% of songwriters were women [and] a whopping 64% of respondents named sexual harassment and objectification as a major challenge women face in the industry.' (Bossi, 2021)

Of the UK's top 40 best-selling songs of the 21st century so far, according to officialcharts.com, 13 were by female artists named as the lead. These comprise Adele (x2), Rihanna (x2), Leona Lewis (x2), Lady Gaga (x3), Alexandra Burke, Atomic Kitten, Cheryl Cole, and Kylie Minogue. Not a single one of these was written or produced without men, with 6 of them having no female involvement at all in the writing or production processes. It's not just the music industry that involves gender bias, of course, with 'only eight women – all white […] among the chief executives of FTSE companies' (Alibhai-Brown, 2022: 23). But as the focus of this book is on popular music, we shall consider this specifically here.

If ever we needed a reminder of the staggering male dominance in the music industry, then we should remember that, to date, The Go-

Go's are 'the only all-female band that wrote their own songs and played their own instruments to have a chart-topping album. That was their debut, "Beauty and the Beat," released in 1981' (Chang, 2020).

At the time of writing, that's 41 years ago.

Part 1: Girl Power?

In an article for *The Evening Standard*, journalist Harry Fletcher praises girl groups for 'spread[ing] the word of female empowerment across the world' (Fletcher, 2018). In reality, though, the really popular, commercially successful girl-groups of the last 30 years have all only been as feminist as the male-dominated music industry allows them to be, which means not very feminist at all (or, at least, the watered-down and safe version of what the patriarchy thinks a non-male-damaging version of feminism is). Let's take a look at Little Mix's 2018 music video for their song 'Woman like Me' as an example. Although heralded by a number of media outlets for its 'feminism' and 'empowerment' (MTV News/ PopBuzz/ Metro/ Independent), it actually just serves to underline my earlier comment about a so-called 'empowering' song being dictated by men. Firstly, the song was released on Simon Cowell's record label 'Syco', so it was bankrolled by a man. Secondly, it was 50% written by men. The other 50% was written by Jess Glynne and Nicki Minaj, and if we assume (which is invariably the case with her) that Minaj wrote only her own 'verse', 2/3rds of the parts sung by Little Mix were written by men. The song was produced by Steve Mac and the music video directed by Marc Kasfeld, both men. This isn't for one minute suggesting that men are unable to put across feminist messages (I for one like to think I shout loudly for the cause), but surely for the message to have real resonance in songs like this, the actual power needs to be given to women before they are used as mouthpieces, or else it's just more empty posturing from a business where men pull all the strings. So with this song, Little Mix were told what words to sing (by a songwriting team that were 2/3rds men),

told how to sing them by a male producer, and then told how to mime to them, how to move, and where to stand in the music video directed by a man. And when this was all done, a company run by a man had the final say on when it was released, and by what means. And what about the rhetoric from the media that the video 'rejects stereotypes' (Aniftos, 2018)? 'Set at a correctional facility, the girls are forced to conform into "stereotypical" women, learning to iron clothes and properly sip tea.' (Aniftos, 2018) Forgive me, but when was the last time that this was a stereotype for women? The 1960s? And for *all* women, rather than just the upper classes? This doesn't even speak to my grandmother's experiences, and she's 89. Actually, in this video, Little Mix *reinforce* a stereotype, and one that is far more recognisable by a modern audience: to be 'proper' modern women, they need to have faultless skin, meticulously applied make-up, shaved legs and armpits, have long hair, full lips, large breasts and/or prominent backsides, small waists, and blindingly white teeth. And where exactly do all these body ideals come from? Clue: it's not from feminism. The suggestion of Roth (2018) that 'the feminism jumped out' of the song is far wide of the mark.

However, Little Mix are merely the latest in a long line of female artists dictated to by the music industry. The statistics below, outlining the album releases of the biggest UK 'girl groups' from 1996 to the present, demonstrate that the concept of 'girl power', famously coined by The Spice Girls, is a myth, and that to this day men dominate the record labels, songwriting, production, and music video direction of 'girl' groups, which 'are obvious marketing constructions, built with sexual fantasies (and fantasy types) in mind to sell to wide audiences' (Lieb, 2013: 120):

The Spice Girls' album output (1996-2000)

Spice Girls - All songs co-written with men (10); all songs produced by men; all music videos (5) directed by men.

Spiceworld - All songs co-written with men (10); all songs produced by men; all music videos (4) directed by men.

Forever - All songs co-written with men (11); all songs produced by men; all music videos (3) directed by men.

Overview: Every song written or co-written by men; all songs produced by men; all music videos directed by men.

Sugababes (2000-2004)

One Touch – All songs co-written by men (12); all songs produced by men; music videos (4) directed by men.

Angels with Dirty Faces - All songs co-written by men (12); all songs produced by men; 2/4 music videos directed or co-directed by men.

Three - 12/14 songs co-written by men; all songs produced or co-produced by men; music videos (4) all directed by men.

Overview: 36/38 songs written or co-written by men; all songs produced by men; 10/12 music videos directed by men.

Girl Aloud (2003-2008)

Sound of the Underground – All songs written or co-written by men (13); all songs produced by men; all music videos directed by men (3).

What Will the Neighbours Say? - All songs written or co-written by men (12); all songs produced by men; 2/5 music videos directed or co-directed by men.

Chemistry – 10/11 tracks co-written by men; all songs produced by men; 3/4 music videos directed or co-directed by men.

Tangled Up - All songs written or co-written by men (12); all songs produced by men; 2/3 music videos directed or co-directed by men.

Out of Control - All songs written or co-written by men (11); all songs produced by men; 1/3 music videos directed by men.

Overview: 58/59 songs written or co-written by men; all songs produced by men; 11/18 music videos directed by men.

The Saturdays (2008-2012)

Chasing Lights – All songs (12) written or co-written by men; all songs produced by men; all music videos (5) directed by men.

Wordshaker - All songs (12) written or co-written by men; all songs produced by men; 1/2 music videos directed by men.

On Your Radar - All songs (14) written or co-written by men; all songs produced by men; 2/3 music videos directed by men.

Overview: All songs written or co-written by men; all songs produced by men; 8/10 music videos directed by men.

Little Mix (2012 – present)

DNA - All songs (12) written or co-written by men; all songs produced by men; 2/4 music videos directed or co-directed by men.

Salute - All songs (12) written or co-written by men; all songs produced by men; 2/3 music videos directed by men.

Get Weird – 11/12 songs written or co-written by men; all songs produced by men; 3/4 music videos directed by men.

Glory Days - All songs (12) written or co-written by men; all songs produced by men; 2/4 music videos directed or co-directed by men.

LM5 – 13/14 songs written or co-written by men; all songs produced by men; all (2) music videos directed or co-directed by men.

Confetti – 12/13 songs written or co-written by men; all songs produced/ co-produced by men; 3/4 music videos directed or co-directed by men.

Overview: 72/75 songs written or co-written by men; all songs produced by men; 14/21 music videos directed or co-directed by men.

Part 2: Appearance

Madonna, who has been active as an artist during 39 of the 41 years since The Go Go's hit the top of the album charts, expressed her disgust at the (mis)treatment of female artists 'at the Billboard Women in Music 2016 event, where she was honored as Woman of the Year [opening] her thank-you remarks with this zinger: "I stand before you as a doormat, Oh, I mean, as a female entertainer," She went on: "Thank you for acknowledging my ability to continue my career for 34 years in the face of blatant sexism and misogyny and constant bullying and relentless abuse."' (Iasimone, 2017)

She went on to highlight the double standards between how men and women are treated in the industry, saying:

> "There are no rules—if you're a boy. If you're a girl, you have to play the game. What is that game? You are allowed to be pretty and cute and sexy. But don't act too smart. Don't have an opinion. Don't have an opinion that is out of line with the status quo, at least. You are allowed to be objectified by men and dress like a slut, but don't own your sluttiness […] Be what men want you to be […]"
> The Rushing Hour, 2016

Lieb notes that '…female pop stars are held to rigid standards of appearance and beauty that box them into small numbers of highly patterned types […] there are more artist types and positions available to men, and most of them prioritize music over their bodies and costumes.' (Lieb, 2018: 9)

Although the concept of the male gaze and male control over women's appearances hasn't changed in centuries, the desired, or 'ideal' body shape has. For example, in the 1970s 'skinny was […] the ideal', in the 1980s 'Women were meant to be tan, tall, thin, but

slightly athletic', and the 1990s 'presented the thinnest feminine ideal in history.' (Petty, 2021) Fast forward to 2022, and now 'Having a big bum, small waist and large boobs is in vogue – think Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj or Kim Kardashian [with] many women [now feeling] pressure to conform to an ideal so-called "black body", with curves in all the right places.' (Tetteh, 2022)

Tetteh says:

> '…this narrative crosses racial lines. I met a young white woman, with a passion for all things Notting Hill Carnival, who is planning to go under the knife and have buttock implants to get what she refers to as a "black physique". She's aware of the risks – there have been well-documented cases of such surgery ending in death – but is prepared to take drastic action to get the look she wants.'
> Tetteh, 2022

Even Nicki Minaj, one of the most noted examples of the 'big bum, small waist and large boobs' look was pressured into it by a man.

> 'According to Nicki, Lil' Wayne would have different women with a large derriere in the studio, as muses, in the studio. And as a sister to the Young Money roster, she never felt good enough because she didn't look the way those women did. While she maintains no one told her to do anything to her body, jokes from the crew triggered her insecurities. "I think Wayne and them said stuff sometimes jokingly. But to a young girl or up and coming rapper or anything like that, when it's from someone like Lil Wayne, it matters."'
> Sanders, 2022

And so the cycle begins:

1. Minaj is coerced into getting body augmentation by a man

2. In turn, she feeds this male idea of 'ideal' body shape into her lyrics, e.g. in ASAP Ferg's 'Plain Jane (remix)' where she raps: 'My body shaped like Jeannie, booty dreamy, waist is teeny', or in 'I'm Out', 'Flawless', 'Anaconda', 'Throw some mo', 'Fefe', or 'Monster' where she similarly describes her big bum, small waist and large

boobs body type, going as far as rubbishing other women who haven't got the same.

3. This then influences other women, with Bursztynsky noting in 2019 that: 'buttocks augmentations […] have more than doubled since [2013].' (Bursztynsky, 2019)

Whatever the 'ideal' shape may be as it shifts from decade to decade, what always remains the same is that female artists remain perpetually sexualised. Daly states that 'Back in 1999, when Britney Spears was just 27 [sic: she, was actually 17], the pop princess appeared on the cover of Rolling Stone lying on pink satin sheets dressed in only her underwear and an unbuttoned shirt. It's a classic example of the sexualisation of female pop artists that still persists today.' (Daly, 2022) There is an ongoing sexualisation of women in the music industry, with apparent pressure for female artists to be sexualised, or to dress a certain way or be a certain shape, e.g.:

- 'Ex Fifth-Harmony member Camila Cabello felt uncomfortable with the band being sexualised. "Unfortunately, sex sells," the 19-year-old singer said.' (Harmsworth, 2017: 12)

- Claire Richards, from Steps recalled a conversation with Steps manager Tim Byrne: '"We want you to be in the band, Claire," said Tim. "We think you've got a great voice and everything but, if you want to do it, you're going to have to lose weight."' (Richards, 2012: 48)

- Una Healy, formerly of The Saturdays, remarked in 2017 that 'the thing she won't miss about performing with her bandmates is having to totter about in stage in towering shoes' (Stitchbury, 2017).

This last was a throwaway comment in an article that was written in a joking, informal manner, but the phrase 'having to' unwittingly reveals a much more serious, and rather damning commentary on the industry. Instead of discussing who is responsible for such controlling behaviour, however, Stitchbury ignores the bigger

picture and keeps things 'light', as that's what's expected. Would a story about a male performer being placed under such restrictions be treated with equal joviality, I wonder? The notion of women 'having' to wear heels is one that Rossi, author of the text *The Sex Life of the Foot and Shoe* explores, pointing out that

> '…men gain a sadistic pleasure in "observing women in high heels" which comes from "viewing the insecurity and discomfort of women in these heels, forcing them to be more dependent upon masculine support". What he calls the "erotic magic" of high heels comes from the way in which they "feminize" the gait by, "causing a shortening of the stride and a mincing step that suggests a degree of helpless bondage. This appeals to the chivalrous or machismo nature of many men".'
> Jeffreys, 2005: 139

The expected wearing of high heels isn't limited to women in the music industry, of course, but it's certainly very present within it. The Official Top 30 biggest-selling female artist albums in UK chart history shows: 1. Adele, *21*; 2. Amy Winehouse, *Back to Black*; 3. Madonna, *The Immaculate Collection*; 4. Shania Twain, *Come on Over*; 5. Adele, *25*; we can see a trend. Of the identified 'most streamed tracks' on each album—respectively 'Someone like you'; 'Back to Black'; 'Like a Prayer', 'Man! I feel Like a Woman!', and 'Hello—high heels are worn in all videos where feet are visible (which are all videos but Adele's), and Adele wears them during her 2011 Brit Awards performance of 'Someone Like You'. And they are startlingly prevalent in 'girl group' music videos. We can't ignore the fact that many of these artists may *wish* to wear high heels, of course, but they are all working within an industry where it is expected, so choice is taken out of the equation. And it's not just the footwear of female artists that is subject to manipulation. Dworkin wrote in 1974 that:

> 'In our culture, not one part of a woman's body is left untouched, unaltered. No feature or extremity is spared the art, or pain, of improvement. Hair is dyed, lacquered, straightened, permanented; eyebrows are plucked, pencilled, dyed; eyes are lined, mascaraed,

> shadowed; lashes are curled, or false—from head to toe, every feature of a woman's face, every section of her body is subject to modification, alteration.'
> (Dworkin, 1974: 112)

Nearly 50 years later, things have only gotten more extreme. We live in an age where the 'ideal' is forced down our throats on a daily basis. Ideal teeth, ideal hair, ideal body shape, ideal number of sexual partners and so on. We are faced with a seemingly never-ending barrage of reality TV shows where female participants are tanned, buxom, big-lipped (and often big-bottomed) with luxurious hair and the obligatory blindingly white teeth and not a stretch mark, stray body hair, or evidence of cellulite in sight. And this kind of appearance-obsessed culture has certainly extended to music, resulting in a situation where, as McCallum and Dzidic suggest '…an artist's image and body seem to be more important commodities than the music they write and perform.' (McCallum and Dzidic, 2019: 405).

The British Association of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons say that '92% of all cosmetic procedures recorded' are performed on women (BAAPS, 2019). As Lieb notes:

> '…record labels could sign more artists like Adele, Kelly Clarkson, or Beth Ditto (from Gossip) - powerful music-first singers who resonate deeply with their audiences, but aren't as hyper-sexualised as most contemporary female popular music stars. But based on the limits of our social system, our modern music industry, our country's gender norms and expectations, and our capitalist business ideals, we don't often make this gamble, opting instead to prioritize packaging over talent.'
> Lieb, 2013: 7

Part 3: Marketing

If we look at how major male and female artists are marketed, we can see the depth of the industry's double standards. As an example, let us compare Ed Sheeran's 2022 tour poster for '+ - ÷ x'

with Christina Aguilera's for her 'Liberation' tour. Sheeran's shows him dressed in jeans and t-shirt, back to the camera, holding his guitar aloft in front of a capacity crowd. Aguilera's, by contrast, involves a black and white shot of her face and upper body (down to just above her breasts), lips parted, seemingly naked below this point with the text 'Liberation by Christina Aguilera'. The whole effect is one of a perfume advert rather than tour poster, with the focus firmly on Aguilera's appearance rather than her music. As a broader example, observe the photographs attached to female artists on ticket sales sites such as Live Nation (I recommend contrasting Cardi B, Nicki Minaj, and Megan Thee Stallion with Stormzy, Dave, and Kendrick Lamar, just to compare artists from the hip-hop genre). Such behaviours are also evident in album covers. In the 10 best-selling albums of 2021, there are 4 male solo artists represented (Ed Sheeran with *Equals* and *Divide*, Elton John with *Diamonds*, and Dave with *We're All Alone in This Together*) and 3 females (Adele with *30*, Olivia Rodrigo with *Sour*, and Dua Lipa with *Future Nostalgia*) with the remaining top 10 entrants made up by Abba, Queen, and Fleetwood Mac respectively. The albums covers for *Equals, Divide,* and *Diamonds* show neither Sheeran nor John, and Dave's *We're All Alone in This Together* shows a figure in a boat in the distance (impossible to tell who is in it). By contrast, *30* shows Adele's face, perfectly made up with carefully styled hair, *Sour* shows Rodrigo in mid-shot wearing a strappy top, perfectly made up, with carefully styled hair, and *Future Nostalgia* shows Lipa driving a car, perfectly made up, with carefully styled hair, pulling at her unbuttoned shirt. With regard to the make-up, Rossi notes that the 'pressure on women to wear makeup is the requirement that they should appear to be heterosexual' and that, although 'women may well say makeup empowers them […] the interesting question is, what disempowers them about being without their mask?' (Rossi, 1989: 115) So, while only the Lipa cover could be described as in any way sexualised (and even then that's open to debate), the fact is that the female album covers are very much focused on the appearances of their artists (who are styled to appear stereotypically

and unmistakably 'feminine', and thus, according to Rossi heterosexual and available to men) whereas the male album covers are not.

We also see it on stage. Take Beyoncé and Ed Sheeran's 'Perfect Duet (Legendado)' performance on YouTube, for example. Sheeran wears jeans, a t-shirt, and trainers to Beyoncé's elaborate pink gown, complete with train, and high heels. He is dressed for comfort, she is not. Even Taylor Swift started off a la Sheeran, standing and playing the guitar before morphing into elaborate dance routines in an array of costumes. I can't guarantee that this won't happen to Ed Sheeran as his career progresses, of course, but if it does, I'd be happy to write a second edition of this book and eat my words.

Sticking with Beyoncé for a moment, let's look at the music video for 'Apeshit'. While it's clearly a big statement regarding race, the contrast between Beyoncé and Jay Z in the video says everything about the music industry to me. He is stationary, whether sitting or standing, the focus on his *words* when he raps, but Beyoncé is constantly moving and dancing, the focus just as much on her *body* as the words she's saying. Jay Z just had to remember his lines, but Beyoncé had to remember the choreography to about 5 different dances too. The same thing happens in other Beyoncé and Jay Z collaborations: 'Crazy in Love' where Beyoncé, wearing a revealing body suit, dances energetically around Jay Z, who wears jeans and a t-shirt (note also the series of close-ups on Beyoncé's behind as she dances); 'Déjà vu', where Beyoncé, in a very short, revealing dress, dances on Jay Z who is clad in t-shirt and jeans; and 'Drunk in Love' where a bikini-clad Beyoncé, you guessed it, dances for a t-shirt wearing Jay-Z (he may be wearing jeans, too, but the camera never shows *him* below his waist). It's not just in Beyoncé's collaborations with Jay Z that we see such things, either, with similar occurrences on Beyoncé's songs 'Baby Boy' (feat. Sean Paul), 'Check on it' (feat. Bun B and Slim Thug), and 'Mine' (feat. Drake). And that's *Beyoncé*, 'a modern feminist icon.' (Hollywood.com staff, 2014) We see these behaviours everywhere across music videos, even in songs which purport to rally about the feminist cause. In the Little Mix video

'Power', they sing 'we have the power' while engaging in dance routines, wearing revealing clothes (with numerous changes) and heavy make-up. And guest artist Stormzy? Well, he delivers his section seated in a barber's chair, stationary, with his face the only skin on show. So Little Mix may have the power, but only as long as they are happy to work within the narrow parameters set out for female groups in the music industry: you must dance (preferably while wearing high heels which make routines that much harder – male backing dancers are free to wear trainers, though), wear revealing clothes, and look classically 'feminine' at all times, with long hair and lots of make-up.

This is even the case for artists who are considered 'serious' singers. 'Consider the oeuvre of pop singer Christina Aguilera, who titled her 2003 album *Stripped* […], mud-wrestled in a humping fashion in her video *Dirrty*, and likes to wear assless chaps. "She's a wonderful role model," Aguilera's mother proclaimed on a VH1 special about her daughter, "trying to change society so that a woman can do whatever men do." (Levy, 2006: 31). Admirable sentiments, but I can't recall the last time a male artist who has what Classic FM describes as an incredible voice, on a par with the best jazz, blues, and soul singers (Shaw Roberts, 2019), dressed in 'assless' chaps and mud-wrestled half-naked to sell records. So, despite what her mother may say, Aguilera is *not* doing whatever a man can do: she is doing what a man does then a hell of a lot *more* in order to remain popular. In the opening scene of her 2018 'Accelerate' music video, after dipping her tongue into a glass of milk, we see a close-up shot of Aguilera's lower face, with milk dripping from her lower lips down her chin. Later on we see a (presumably naked) Aguilera having lubricant poured over her head, then caressing her breasts (naked except for black tape 'Xs') as the lubricant runs over them, before putting her tongue between her index and ring fingers (in the common symbol for cunnilingus). By way of comparison, similarly lauded vocalist Michael Bublé's 2018 music video for 'Love You Anymore' sees him walking along the beach wearing a long coat, t-shirt, and trousers. No need for him to show he's willing and able to

perform oral sex (either on women or men), and no need for him to show his naked body is physically desirable. It might very well be that Aguilera *wants* to present herself in this way, and that, of course, is her prerogative. The problem is that it seems that female artists *need* to present themselves in this way in order to remain popular and/or relevant, whereas male singers can simply get on with the art of singing. As Kite and Kite note, 'Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female.' (Kite & Kite, 2020: 104)

Lieb suggests that all female performers must fit into categories within the industry in order to be successful and to maintain a career. She identifies these as the ''Good Girl' (where there is no or minimal sexuality), 'Temptress' (where they embrace the overtly sexual), 'Whore' (where they are a sex-first commodity), or 'Hot Mess' categories. They cannot inhabit these at the same time, but may move backwards and forwards between them, e.g. Christina Aguilera.' (Lieb, 2018: 153) Clearly such categorisations as 'good girl', 'temptress', and 'whore' aren't (and cannot be) applied to men, but, as Lieb goes on to say, the 'hot mess' demonstrates the double standards that are so common, with gender 'playing a central role in who is termed as such, and who is not.' (Lieb, 2018: 153) For example:

> 'Janis Joplin, Whitney Houston, Courtney Love, Britney Spears, Amy Winehouse, and Kesha have all been dubbed "hot messes," while their male contemporaries such as The Rolling Stones' Keith Richards, Aerosmith's Steven Tyler, Michael Jackson, Kurt Cobain, Elliott Smith, Eminem, and Justin Bieber have all been cast as troubled or misunderstood geniuses, tortured heroes, or boys testing boundaries and making mistakes as they become men in the public eye. Such generosity is not extended to female stars, who are framed and shamed for being out of control and out of line.'
> Lieb, 2018: 153

Even the lyrics to songs by female artists are subject to different expectations than those by their male counterparts. As Flanagan observes:

> 'In an open letter [Bjork] argued that female performers were often derided if they sang about anything other than love, relationships and motherhood. She said that women artists were criticised if they "don't cut our chest open and bleed about the men in our lives". "Women in music are allowed to be singer-songwriters, singing about their boyfriends…[but] if they change the subject matter to atoms, galaxies, activism, nerdy math…or anything else [other] than being performers singing about their loved ones, they get criticised".'
> Flanagan, 2016

So, '[m]ale performers such as Lou Reed, Leonard Cohen, and Bob Dylan are taken seriously when they explore dark emotions, but for women artists, it's less acceptable.' (O'Brien, 2012: 326)

At the time of writing, the hashtag #breakthebias is trending in the lead-up to International Women's Day. If there is going to ever be true equality in the music industry, then either male artists need to start doing what is expected of women (for example, Ed Sheeran learning complicated dance routines while singing, going off stage after every song to change costumes, wearing shoes that cause great pain to the feet, and constricting his leg movements in short skirts), or women should be allowed to focus on their music in the same way, afforded the same luxuries and comfort as their male counterparts. To clarify, for there to be equality, female artists must be allowed to write about what *they* want to write about, and dress as they wish, without the risk of losing popularity or record label backing if they do so. It seems that women have to put in so much more work than men in order to flourish in the music business, and, as long as this is the case, there is no 'power' or equality for them.