Gender, Metal and the Media

Women Fans and the Gendered Experience of Music

Rosemary Lucy Hill

Pop Music, Culture and Identity

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CHAPTER 1

Gender, Metal and the Media: An Introduction

Music is a gendered experience. Rock is assumed to be transcendent of the everyday world, with universal, timeless themes that appeal to everyone (Kruse 2002). Yet, even as rock critics have peddled this myth, they have underpinned their ideology with the sexist claim that women are incapable of understanding the music as an art form. In this context, what 'universal' actually means is 'relevant to men'. However, understandings of how people engage with rock music are implicitly gendered. As Green (1997) and Kruse (2002) make clear, music does not exist outside of the social: it is shaped by our lived experiences and heard in our social contexts. Gender is a crucial part of that shaping, yet gender is typically only seen as relevant to women; men's experiences are seen as general and universal (Wittig 1992). These sexist beliefs mean that understandings of musical engagement are skewed towards men's experiences, with women's added in for a bit of spice in order to cover the 'gender aspect'. This book takes the position that *all* musical experiences are shaped by gender and that the differing social positions of women and men greatly determine those experiences. Sexism creates different climates for men and women in which they seek to enjoy music. And it is a crucial factor in both women's and men's participation in hard rock and metal culture.

Hard rock and metal looks masculine. It is full of glaring, massive, warrior-like men in black. Metal songs are about war, gore and rape. Women are sidelined in this male-dominated and hypermasculine genre. Rarely performing as musicians, they appear in music videos, song lyrics

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and popular representations as groupies, girlfriends and gorgons. Here's Seb Hunter describing the metal attitude towards women:

> Ask a male Heavy Metal fan if he believes there's a place within its walls for women, and more often than not he'll scrunch up his face and reply, "Yes. On her knees with my cock in her mouth". (Hunter 2004, 238)

Hunter is describing a particular version of metal (late 80's/early 90's glam) and his interpretation of that scene (though not necessarily his own views). However, academic research in media, sociology and cultural studies has come to roughly the same conclusion. Metal uses women to create a fantasy world for men (Walser 1993) and uses violently misogynistic imagery in artwork and lyrics (Kahn-Harris 2007; Overell 2010; Vasan 2011; Griffin 2012). Amongst this sexism and the ubiquitously male band line-ups there would seem to be no place for women in the genre.

But, even if extremely underrepresented amongst musicians, women do participate in hard rock and metal, predominantly as fans: around one-third of metal fans are estimated to be women (Purcell 2003). Recent research shows that their experiences are different to those of men in the genre. They are subject to a barrage of questions from male fans to prove the authenticity of their fandom (Nordström and Herz 2013), sidelined by male fans at rock and metal events (Kahn-Harris 2007) and feel they must tolerate male metal fans' sexist attitudes towards their femininity; some choose to wear masculine dress rather than allowing themselves to appear sexually available (Vasan 2010, 2011).

Why then, would women choose to be involved in hard rock and metal?

This paradoxical conundrum has personal import for me: I love hard rock and metal, but I am also a feminist. How can I square these two important parts of my identity? What role is there for me in metal, as a fan, as an aspiring musician, as a woman committed to bettering the lives of women?

Growing up, my brother and I were rock fans, but it seemed easier for him. His friends shared his taste in music, he never had to qualify whether he *really* liked Metallica, and he never felt excluded by the rock magazines we read. Those magazines rarely felt as if they were speaking to me: women existed outside the pages of the magazines as punchlines of jokes that aimed to unify the audience as heterosexual, male readers engaged in a battle of the sexes. They assumed that women either did not like the music or were involved in the culture because they were attracted to the musicians. I felt this injustice deeply and worked hard to represent my

fandom as one that was as good as any male fan's. I spoke of my fandom in terms of the music itself, and although I felt attracted to some of the musicians, I denied having these feelings. And then I saw that the way to *really* show that I was an authentic fan was to become a rock musician, which I did. Becoming a musician meant stepping out of the role of fan, and that also felt like I was leaving my femininity behind. However, in practice, aiming for the higher-status role of musician meant that my femininity was not forgotten. Instead, I had to work even harder to diminish any girlishness and to be 'one of the guys'. At least I was not a groupie, I thought to myself.

For me, growing up also meant growing feminist sensibilities. And there rock was a stumbling block, for much of the music I loved was made by men—women were conspicuously absent—and many of the singers sang unpleasant things about women. How could I accept this? Was it, as Norma Coates wonders, 'false consciousness' (Coates 1997, 51)? No, it was not as simple as that. I loved the music, and I could not entirely hear my own subjugation in it. Summing up and dismissing the genre as misogynist left out the way in which the music made me feel powerful. In fact, like Ellen Willis (2014), I felt that the music gave me strength to *fight* sexism when I encountered it. How could this understanding of rock 'n' roll be reconciled with assessments that see it as sexist? And didn't these perspectives reduce all rock music to a single monolithic sound and fail to consider the differences between bands' attitudes and politics, their images, their lyrics and music?

These questions, which have not been asked before by metal scholars, are crucially important in understanding how male dominance is reproduced in music cultures and the media's role in this. It is also vital for understanding how musical experience is never not gendered; in fact, the way we experience music through the media, through our social and public interactions and through our private listenings is shaped by gendered expectations, assumptions and roles. Although not all of our experiences are gendered all of the time (and music can sometimes give women spaces in which to temporarily forget gender), the overall experience of hard rock and metal is different for women and men.

In this book I ask these questions to come to grips with the conundrum of what hard rock and metal means for women fans—its sexisms and contradictions, its pleasures and ambiguities, its highs and its lows. I rise to Sue Wise's (1984) challenge for feminist music scholars. Wise describes her experience of loving Elvis. For her, he was a friend, a teddy bear, rather

than the macho god of the mainstream (patriarchal) media. But feminist readings of Elvis took on this image of The King as a macho, sexist god, and this reading made no sense to her—it contradicted her own experience. Wise's challenge is that feminists need to both contest male knowledge about rock music and examine how feminist orthodoxy has taken on male knowledges without rethinking them. This challenge opens up new areas for reinterpreting music, fandom and the media. Addressing these areas brings new light to a dark corner in which female fans of hard rock and metal have been dismissed, having been accused of being cahoots with patriarchy. Furthermore, knowledge about rock music has been left in the hands of male writers who are both invested in retaining the status quo and unaware that being a fan is different for women.

Here are some of the assumptions about women and hard rock and metal that were reinforced at the 2009 Heavy Metal and Gender International Congress in Cologne:

1. if women are not involved in making hard rock and metal music as musicians it is because they choose not to be, rather than that there are structural problems hindering them;
2. metal is asexual because men are involved for the sake of the music, not to meet women—this ignores that metal masculinity can be attractive for some fans, men and women alike. Women and men as desiring subjects are excluded from the discussion;
3. metal is inclusive, and so women can be participants as long as they love the music, are prepared to wear the uniform (jeans, black T-shirt), refrain from desiring metal men, and adopt the same value system. In real terms this sounds very much like an assertion that women can participate in metal as long as they are prepared to be more like men.

These orthodoxies are congratulatory of the genre's open and inclusive attitude—an attitude also prevalent in non-academic discourse about hard rock and metal—even as they reinforce heterosexual masculinity as the norm. Moreover, anyone looking at hard rock and metal magazines and festival line-ups can see that the genre's musicians are nearly all white men; the genre is obviously not inclusive. It may offer strength and a sense of community to those who feel excluded from more mainstream groups, but the rules of hard rock and metal are inflexible. It remains an exclusive 'club', and the rules are written by white, straight men. It precludes the involvement of women, homosexual men and black people.

Increasingly, attention is being paid to women's experiences, and questions about metal's Western whiteness are beginning to be asked. Exciting work is being done on race and gender (e.g., Lucas et al. 2011; Dawes 2012; Spracklen 2015), queerness (Clifford-Napoleone 2015b), masculinities (Overell 2010, 2012; Kartheus 2015) and women's experiences (Vasan 2011; Riches 2011, 2014, 2015; Nordström and Herz 2013) in the hard rock and metal context. The music media remains one area that needs further investigation (but see Brill 2008; Spracklen 2010; Hagen 2014). The media have a part to play in creating a sense of metal community and in reproducing the community's gendered notions which exclude women from full participation (Hill 2014a). Furthermore, the music media's representation of women fans as groupies—adoring and defending of, and ever-available to musicians—is not only a misrepresentation (because most women fans are not groupies), it is damaging. For women it deprives them of role models in their musical aspirations, and it limits the ability to express their fandom. It also places them in danger of sexual exploitation. Understanding how women feel about and reflect upon this representation, and how they negotiate its impact, is therefore vitally important.

One important question to ask is, what is so wrong with being attracted to musicians anyway? Kant's (2010 [1790]) emphasis on disinterestedness as a crucial element of the aesthetic experience of beauty underpins dominant values in hard rock and metal culture, as it does in all rock's claims to be 'art' (Regev 1994). Kant's theory has been critiqued as blind to socially learned responses to culture and reifying of a particular middle and upper class experience (Bourdieu 2010). It is also dismissive of sexual and somatic responses. The diminution of this sort of musical appreciation results in a smaller and less nuanced understanding of our fandoms. Susan Fast's (1999) work on Led Zeppelin is informative on this point. Just as Wise counters typical understandings of Elvis by reflecting on her feelings about The King, so Fast challenges most readings of Led Zeppelin. She examines her own passion for their music alongside a large number of survey responses from fans, close readings of the band's visual imagery, and analysis of the music in order to parry journalistic accounts, and Frith and McRobbie's (1990 [1978]) conceptualisation of the band as 'simply' masculine. The conclusions Fast draws are staggering because they complicate notions of what the band and their music mean for the fans. She problematises those ideas about listening and musical engagement that are narrowly defined by gender. Rather than challenging suggestions that women fans do not pay serious attention to the music, Fast engages closely

with the different kinds of relationships that women and men fans have with the object of their fandom. It signals that there is something wrong with the model of 'real' fans as *only* interested in the music. That model is based on an idea of what it means to be a music lover that is embedded in the mind/body, rational/emotional, man/woman dichotomies. It ignores other kinds of experience of women's fandom, such as the sensual and erotic—but these are crucial elements of music fandom.

My key argument in this book is that gender and sexism shape our engagements with music and that hard rock and metal is not just for men. The musical genre and its culture have much to offer fans and is much more diverse than it is has been characterised. To assume that it only appeals to men is to rely upon narrow definitions of what it means to be feminine or masculine, to be a woman or a man. This assumption plays into the undervaluing of women's fandom—reducing women fans to heterosexually desiring bodies whose cultural interests are unsophisticated and unimportant (Radway 1984; Baym 1999). This is exactly how women fans are characterised in the hard rock and metal media, and this presents a significant barrier to women's musical aspirations. The assumption that hard rock and metal is only for men also ignores the different ways in which people make meaning in the media they encounter—this means men as well as women. Drawing on Stuart Hall's work on how we engage with the media (1973) and the impact of representations (1997), I argue that women fans carefully negotiate the representation of women fans that they encounter in the media in order to forge their own identities as metal fans. And they choose music and listen in ways that enable them to 'flourish' (Hesmondhalgh 2013) without feeling oppressed by 'repressive representations' (Whiteley 2000) in the music. Note that whilst much of the writing about hard rock and metal concentrates on the public aspects of music fandom (attending concerts and festivals, for instance), in this book I am much more interested in private experiences of fandom: listening to music at home, in the car, on headphones and so on.

Gender

Gender is a complex term with a range of different uses, some that are very politically loaded and some that are less so, or are perceived to be neutral. But the use of the term 'gender' is never truly neutral. Even in a simple survey to determine shopping habits, the use of 'gender' has profound implications both for those completing the questionnaire and those using the data. 'Gender' on the questionnaire is used to divide the respondents,

to group them and to market to them as a distinct group. Gender therefore makes a division and has an impact on how we see ourselves, how we are perceived by others, the institutional and structural boundaries placed upon us, and how we are able to live our lives. In this study, gender is an important concept which is used to understand what the impact of these kinds of division are. In this book, 'gender' refers to the socially constructed distinction between the groups 'women' and 'men'—gender as a concept, the idea of the divide itself. When I refer to gendered experiences I mean experiences that are shaped by the belief in the differences between women and men. I am not examining gender performances, as a Butlerian approach might; rather, I am interested in how gender works to structure our social lives and to naturalise hierarchy between apparently distinct groups ('women', 'men'). This definition of gender—as a division rather than as two distinct things (feminine and masculine)—is drawn from the work of Christine Delphy (1993), amongst others, and is fundamental to the book. Therefore, it requires a bit more explanation.

Feminists such as Ann Oakley (1972) have conclusively shown that the relationship between biological sex (whether one is female or male) and gender, as its social expression (whether one is feminine or masculine), is not natural. Gendered traits do not automatically follow from sex traits; rather, they are learned or culturally ascribed and are 'independent of sex' (Delphy 1993, 3). But because the relationship between sex and its social expression has been overstated, traits which are thought to mark differences between women and men have also been exaggerated and confused. Biologists have shown that sex is defined by several indicators—there is no single indicator, which would be needed for a binary distinction—and most of these are variable, that is, not found only in one sex or the other. In spite of this, for the most part people are still represented in ways that say they are distinctly in one group or the other; sex is believed to be an undeniable fact. Delphy points out, though, that because sex is variable and has several indicators, deciding which aspects specify sex—and how much of that aspect—is a social act. For example, the distinction between those who can bear children and those who cannot does not divide humans into two clear groups (there are many more people who cannot bear children than there are men: age, infirmity, fertility all play a role). The most logical way to understand the foundation of the difference between men and women is therefore as a social division, one created by people in order to create a division and hierarchy. Sex is consequently socially determined and acts as a sign, a marker of a social division which creates two groups. 'Sex' is therefore a social rather than biological category. Thus 'women'

is a social group, with no biological basis (as is 'men'). Similarly, Butler (1993) argues (perhaps more famously) that sex is socially determined rather than biologically given. Where for Butler sex comes into being only through its continual performance, for Delphy gender is a construct that functions to ensure hierarchy. The emphasis is placed on social structure and it is political. I find Delphy's 'gender' more convincing because it is inextricably linked with the oppression of women and therefore allows structural inequalities to be addressed (Jackson 1998). She argues that the division created by gender is only reproduced in order to repeat the division. Imagining a world without gender is therefore a key role of feminism. In this, feminism shares something with metal: imagining the future world in different ways is a recurrent theme in the genre. But perhaps that's where the similarity ends.

It is this version of gender that underpins the book, one which does not believe in essential differences between women and men. The differences that I discuss are socially constructed, taught to us or shaped by our experiences as we perceive ourselves and are perceived to be different from the other group. Therefore, the differences in the media's representations of women and of men that I discuss in Chapter 3 are fundamentally problematic. They serve to reproduce gender and, because gender is designed to create and support hierarchy, they thereby create, support and maintain men's dominance over women: women and men are not different-but-equal.

I argue in Chapter 4 that women's erotic and sexual responses are important kinds of musical engagement—as are men's. That is not to assert that particular bodies produce particular sexual responses (that is, sexuality does not follow from biology). I do not here explore sexuality in detail, but I do draw on the ideas of Jackson and Scott (2010) whose work on sexuality takes it not as a presocial fact, but rather explores its social function and social expression. For further reading on metal and sexuality see Fast (1999) and Clifford-Napoleone (2015b).

Experience

The women I spoke to when researching this book self-identified as women. Considering women's experiences is a feminist method that, in this case, uses the Marxist theory of the 'view from below', allowing different standpoints to draw attention to the ways in which oppressive ideas are normalised. For Nancy Hartsock this means employing a specifically feminist standpoint in order to 'understand patriarchal institutions and

ideologies as perverse inversions of more humane social relations' (1983, 284). However, the category of experience is problematic and it is crucial to ask, whose experience counts (hooks 1984)? There is a risk of collapsing women into a unified category, eliding differences between women (not least those of race, sexuality and class) (Scott 2008). Plus, not all women are feminists, and so examining women's experiences does not necessarily offer a direct route to critiques of patriarchy. Acknowledging different standpoints is therefore essential for valuing women's experiences and challenging knowledge about women (Hill Collins 1990; Smith 2008). Marginalised groups—such as women in hard rock and metal culture—can bring new perspectives to institutions and structures that affect social lives and that are taken for granted. For this reason, experience remains an important concept with which to examine orthodoxies about hard rock, metal and women fans. It is a useful tool with which to assess theory that claims to be universal (Stanley and Wise 1993). Wise's use of her own experience as an Elvis fan is a case in point, as it enables her to challenge dominant *and* feminist constructions of rock music.

In this book I use 'experience' to refer to the way in which the women I interviewed described to me things that happened in their lives. In relating what had happened to them and reflecting upon those incidents, the incidents became experiences—things that had happened that were then theorised from each particular woman's viewpoint. Experiences are therefore shaped by our gendered, classed and raced positions, as well as other positions. The experiences were also mediated by memory, emotions, later incidents and by the context of the telling. As Liz Stanley argues, we make sense of ourselves and incidents in our past, putting together events and using 'fictive devices' (1992, 62) to construct a necessarily partial self tied together by limited memory. Events, emotions and people are 'linked only in such accounts and not in life as it was lived' (1992, 62). Not all of the women's experiences are constructed via memories; some women used hypothetical situations to discuss their fandom, which were imaginative fictions drawing on their experiences and their knowledge about hard rock and metal bands and culture. In the process of making sense of their experiences, imagination played an important role in my interviewees' answers. Of course, the use of fictive devices and imagination in reconstructing events and experiences 'does not mean that the past and its mythologies are not "real"' (Stanley 1992, 86). The way in which the selves are imagined and the experiences put together is a real process, and the experiences the women related, rethought, reconstructed and reimagined have real meaning in the world.

I spoke to 19 women living in cities in England during 2008–2011. All were white and but one were British (she was Finnish). The whiteness of my sample was not a conscious decision, although it is regrettable, but came about through the snowballing method: I was introduced to white women or white women responded to my advert. It is generally accepted by British metal scholars that visible fans of metal in Britain are predominantly white, although little work has been done to ascertain this. It must be assumed that the conclusion has been reached from metal scholars' observations at concerts and festivals. It should be noted that in other parts of the world metal fandom is not the preserve of white people: hard rock and metal has appeal around the globe (Wallach et al. 2011). Whiteness in my interviewees' responses is an invisible, unacknowledged privilege, and none mentioned issues of race and fandom. This is distinct from Dawes' (2012) work in which race is a vital analytical category and one which is discussed at length by interviewees. Notably her participants are in the main black; this distinction highlights the assumption that whiteness is the norm, or is even perceived as an essential quality of metal in the UK. Metal and race remains an area that is in need of greater attention.

Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 69, clustering around late 20s and early 30s. Therefore, this study takes into account the viewpoints of young women, older women and those in between. This is not research across the life course, and I reflect upon interviewees' ages only where it is salient to the analysis. It also marks a difference between much published work on hard rock and metal fans, which looks at the experiences of young people. However, hard rock and metal is not just young men's music. It is genre which holds onto fans into adulthood and old age. The prospect of old people's homes for aged metallers is therefore not just a joke made by one of my interviewees: it has a distinct possibility of becoming reality.

My interviewees described themselves as working or middle class. Class is a controversial area in metal studies. Weinstein argues that it is a working class genre (Weinstein 2000 [1991]), and others have suggested that whatever the class make-up of the genres' bands and fans in the post-2000s, it remains symbolically working class (Brown 2009; Riches 2011). Conversely, it has been argued that for all its working-class roots, in many ways metal is a very middle class genre. Drawing on Walser's argument of the necessity of high musical standards in metal (Walser 1993), I argue that to be a successful musician requires significant musical training and equipment, and the kinds of intense practice and musicianship that are required for classical music. This suggests access to funds that are more likely to be

available in middle class families. Published discussions of metal and class have drawn on the known class backgrounds of the musicians, but there is little quantitative data on the class backgrounds of fans. In her study of the death metal subculture, Purcell found that 'the majority of respondents were middle class' (Purcell 2003, 108), but her respondents were a mixture of fans and musicians (and fan-musicians). There is then, no published evidence of the class make-up of fans, and no consensus amongst metal scholars either. There is therefore no reason to assume a working class audience for the genre in the UK, and my data bears this out. Those interviewees who declared a class identity were fairly evenly split; four described themselves as working class and five middle class. Others described their identity in more ambiguous terms that reflected upon their family backgrounds and their childhoods, as well as weighing up their current circumstances. Four described themselves as working/middle class and one claimed the identity of 'ex-working class'. One interviewee said she did not know her class, another that she had none, and three did not answer the question. No interviewees claimed an upper- or under-class identity.

My interviewees had various occupations. Eight were professionals (teacher, lecturer, charity manager, laboratory manager, bank mediator, accountant and market analyst); four were students (three undergraduates, one MA); two were unemployed having just completed their studies (one GCSEs, one PhD); three were administrators; one worked in the service industry; one was retired. From this can be seen that generally there was a high level of education amongst my interviewees. Sally, who managed a domestic abuse charity, was in the process of completing her third degree! In some ways this high level of education and the number of professional occupations is symptomatic of the snowballing method of introductions to interviewees, but if this is a trend more general it is suggestive of hard rock and metal as appealing to listeners with higher educations. More information about my interviewees is available in the Appendix.

Metal

I delineate the genre of hard rock and metal very roughly by emphasising those bands who feature in *Kerrang!* magazine. This definition will not suit all readers, but *Kerrang!* with its solid history and reputation as a key publication for the genre is a useful benchmark. The magazine was first published in 1981 as a platform for the new heavy metal bands that were then being excluded from other rock magazines. It was at one