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Girl in a Band: Gender inequality and girlhood in women’s indie music memoirs.

The alternative music scene is a male-dominated environment and this is also reflected in music memoir publishing trends. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, music memoirs such as Keith Richard’s *Life* (2010) Slash’s autobiography (2007), and Anthony Kiedis’s *Scar Tissue* (2005) conquered biography charts. These stories reinstated the sex, drugs and rock’n’roll lifestyle of a musician.

In the 2010s a resurgence and reworking of the rock memoir appeared in UK and US publishing trends, with a notable influx of memoirs written by female musicians. Since Patti Smith released her first memoir, *Just Kids*, in 2010, over eighteen music memoirs by female musicians have been published in the UK in the last decade.

Music memoirs follow a certain formula. That formula must contain: an overview of childhood and adolescence, the high points of a career, the low points of a career, and a life lesson at the end. A love for music, whether that be as a fan or as a musician, is shared in all texts. The indie music memoir is a subgenre of music memoir writing and includes writing from punk and post-punk musicians. Indie memoirs contain all of the elements listed previously but it also contains the story of humble musical beginnings, feeling like an outsider and finding a community and aesthetic to embrace. The indie music memoir is a manifesto for the weirdo and a survival guide to show that outsiders can find a community in underground music scenes. As more music memoirs written by women enter the canon, a new feature must be added to the genre’s list: girlhood.

An aspect unique to women’s music memoirs is the topic of girlhood and the problematising of the term ‘girl in a band’. Four of the rock memoirs published between 2010 and 2020 contain the word ‘girl’ in the title. In this presentation, I will focus specifically on two of those memoirs, which are *Girl in a Band* (2015) by Sonic Youth’s Kim Gordon and *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl* (2015) by Sleater-Kinney’s Carrie Brownstein. Both memoirs were published in 2015 and include the central themes of girlhood and being a woman in music. Although written in isolation from one another, the memoirs complement each other and highlight larger issues within the music industry. Women’s music memoirs cannot escape the topic of girlhood as gender binaries are so intwined in the experience of being a musician. Being a man and performing masculinity are not current reoccurring topics in music memoirs written by men. There is no debate surrounding the word ‘boy’ because there is no discourse surrounding being a ‘boy in a band’. Instead, men’s indie memoirs focus on the music, the stage, and the influences.

Abigail Gardner in her book *Ageing and Contemporary Female Musicians* (2019) argues that women’s music memoirs ‘settle subcultural accounts and they do so by achieving the following: they shed light on the systemic sexism of the music industry […] and they valorise the emotional and affective labour that comes from being a female musician in a popular music world whose myth making excluded them’ (Gardner, 2019, p.30). These memoirs provide critical commentaries on the scenes the artists occupy but, in doing so, they highlight the gender inequality and sexism in the industry. As Gardner argues, these women reinstate their presence in the mythology of rock ‘n’ roll by writing themselves back into it.

Being a woman and in a band creates a ‘meta-course’ where there is ‘the music itself, and then there is the ongoing dialogue about how it feels’ (Brownstein, 2015, p.111). Before the publication of Carrie Brownstein’s memoir, Brownstein interviewed Gordon at the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco. When interviewing Kim Gordon for her memoir*,* Brownstein asks Gordon about her experience as a girl in a band. Brownstein also answers the question herself, saying:

It is part of the experience to be a woman in a band and asked that question – you can’t separate the experience from that question anymore it becomes a very meta experience. (JCCSF, 2015)

Not being able to separate the experience of being a girl and being in a band is also discussed in Brownstein’s memoir as well as Gordon’s. Brownstein writes that being called a ‘“Girl” felt like an identifier that viewers especially male ones, saw as a territory upon which an electric guitar was a tourist’ (Brownstein, 2015, p.101). To interpret Brownstein, female musicians are a tourist of a male space therefore they must assert themselves into the rock music narrative both physically on the stage and within the pages of a memoir.

Gordon’s memoir focuses on being a woman in a band and the expectations placed on female musicians. *Girl in a Band* opens with the final Sonic Youth concert where the band armed themselves with their instruments like ‘an army that just wanted the bombardment to end’ (p.2). With the deterioration of her marriage, the end of her band’s career, and cameras filming her every move, Gordon’s bass acts as a shield to protect herself from the eyes of the audience. Ultimately, performing onstage is about attempting to yield control over how one is perceived and to manipulate the gaze. When performing onstage, Gordon argues that ‘[t]he girl anchors the stage, sucks in the male gaze’ (p.4). The space is attributed with ‘masculine characteristics linked to male rivalry and competitiveness, fragile male egos, male aggression and ambition’ (Cohen, 1997, p.30). Gordon dismantles the masculinity of the stage by anchoring the stage and controlling her positioning. Although Gordon attempts to control her environment, she is still not free from the unobtainable expectations and blatant sexism of a male-dominated space.

Masculinity is the default setting for rock music hence women have to validate their presence. Brownstein argues that ‘no one has ever sat down and asked X, Y or Z band: why did you decide to be in an all-male band’ (JCCSF, 2015). Being a woman is tied up in the experience of being a musician. Music therefore becomes a gendered experience. Sleater-Kinney were ‘pigeonholed’ by the media as a riot grrrl band due to being a band of women despite identifying with the term indie more (Babovic, 2016, p.2). Jovana Babovic writes about the categorising of Sleater-Kinney by the media in her book *Dig Me Out,* stating: ‘The language of authority implied that a band comprised of three women had no business in the male-dominated rock world’ (Babovic, 2016, pp.52). The legitimacy of an all-female band is questioned by male-dominated journalism and music critics. The language of music journalism, and the pressure to conform to pre-existing gender stereotypes, are connected to experience of being a ‘girl in a band’. The question looming over Kim Gordon’s text is ‘What’s it like to be a girl in a band?’ (Gordon, 2016, p.150). Gordon receives this interrogation throughout her career and is reduced to her gender rather than an individual. Male journalists commenting on Gordon’s gender and its relationship to her career indicates that a woman entering a male-dominated community acts as a threat. Brownstein and Gordon articulate these pressures both as a musician and as a memoirist. Music is genderless but critics and gatekeepers of the industry project gender onto music.

The music memoir as a format allows for debates around inequality in the music industry to occur. The problematisation of the term ‘girl in a band’ in the memoirs of the first half of the 2010s highlights one of the many issues in the white patriarchal norm of the indie music genre. The music memoir allows the memoirist to control their narrative and reinstate their validity as a musician. This discussion displays the cracks in the indie music scene and dismantles the hedonistic utopia often painted of the world through song and oral accounts. Ultimately the discussion of gender performance and what it represents in the wider genre of indie music is inevitably present in women’s music memoirs. This discussion is currently absent from indie memoirs written by men because gender is not a barrier the musicians who are currently published have encountered.

A musician’s life is partly a collective experience. Living their lives on stage and in the public eye, a musician’s life is experienced by others. It is vital for women’s voices to be inserted into the rock ‘n’ roll narrative as women ‘are generally written out of historical accounts of music in order to reinscribe the creative dominance of men’ (Strong, 2011, p.398). Memoirs allow the musician to craft a version of themselves to deliver to an audience, in a similar way to an album capturing a moment in the artist’s career. Putting women’s voices to the forefront creates a space for women musicians and fans to see themselves and dismantle the idea of music being a masculine space. To do that, the presence of the ‘girl in a band’ must be addressed before the narrative can move on from it.

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