UCLA Department of Musicology presents

# MUSE

## *An Undergraduate Research Journal*

# "Writing About Music"

Vol. 1, No. 1

"Dissonant Ones: The Harmony of Lou Reed and John Cale"
*Gabriel Deibel*

"*Waitress*! Equalitea and Pie, Please"
*Irena Huang*

"Boy Band: Intersecting Gender, Age, Sexuality, and Capitalism"
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"A Possible Resolution for the Complicated Feelings Revolving Around Tyler, the Creator"
*Isabel Nakoud*

"Being the Cowboy: Mitski's Rewriting of Gender Roles in Indie Rock"
*Jenna Ure*

Winter 2020

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# Introduction

Alana Chester, Matthew Gilbert, and Karen Thantrakul

*Adapted from the introduction to the MUSE launch event.*

We, the editors, would like to welcome you to the launch of MUSE, UCLA's first undergraduate journal publishing student work in music scholarship. We really appreciate the support we have received over the last few weeks getting this journal up and running.

MUSE is a project of both the undergraduate musicology department, and the Active Listening Club, UCLA's first musicology-based club. The idea of a club came to us last year in a meeting with Emily Spitz, the undergraduate student advisor for the Herb Alpert School of Music, one afternoon. Alana was talking to Emily about how much she loves this department and how she feels so blessed to be surrounded by such wonderful people, with such diverse interests. She made a comment about wanting to have some sort of club where our cohort could just get together and talk about music. Emily told her if she wanted to, she could start one. So, she did.

In Active Listening Club, we get to understand how many diverse musical tastes there are even amongst our small and collective student body. The club offers a space for people to share what they are passionate about, just as our journal will hopefully be a space where people can share what they are passionate about. Our first edition includes selected essays from Professor Le Guin's 12W, Writing About Music class. Four of the five essays we chose to publish are from non-music or musicology majors, which is hopefully a testament to the quality of Professor Le Guin's teaching and the wonderful education that UCLA provides and not a testament to how easy it is to write about music. Just as in Listening Club, we have a diverse range of topics, including a paper by Isabel Nakoud about her relationship to rapper Tyler, the Creator's music, Grace Li's discussion of the exploitation of boy band One Direction, Gabriel Deibel's essay on the influence of John Cale on the Velvet Underground's experimental sound, a feminist exploration by Irena Huang of the musical *Waitress* (composed by a UCLA alumnus, Sara Bareilles), and a critique of the music industry through indie singer Mitski's music by Jenna Ure.



We've learned a lot through the process of starting an undergraduate journal, most notably how much work goes into crafting something that's actually worth reading, and we're of the opinion that we really did. We wanted to do this because of something that we learned from a quarter of active listening: if people are speaking, or writing, or singing, or playing—we want to hear it. Every voice deserves an audience. There are obvious benefits to the authors for going through this process, and benefits for us in getting to practice our editing skills, but we believe there is a benefit for you as well. America has rapidly become a place where there's a lot of talking, a lot of arguing, but very little listening. Hopefully, this journal will provide an opportunity for all of us to practice our listening skills.

We would like to thank our authors, Gabriel Deibel, Irena Huang, Grace Li, Isabel Nakoud, and Jenna Ure; Professor Le Guin, for her support and guidance in starting this journal; our editorial board, for their committed work in preparing the articles; The event-planning team, Torrey Bubien, Lori McMahan, and Liv Slaby for putting this together; Professor Le Guin's 12W, Writing About Music class for providing their articles for our inaugural edition; and a special thanks to Amanda Armstrong for her help in arranging meetings, scheduling and planning this event, and generally keeping this school running. I would also like to acknowledge JW Clark, a transfer musicology student, for providing the initial spark to get this project started.

In conclusion, we would like to thank you all for coming out and supporting this journal. This has been a learning process, learning how to actively listen in our own lives, learning how to edit papers, learning how to put together a launch event. Everyone has worked so hard to get this done and I know that we learned a lot and so we hope you enjoy it.

Thank you.

# Being the Cowboy: Mitski's Rewriting of Gender Roles in Indie Rock

Jenna Ure

In January of 2012, Mitski Miyawaki released her first album, *Lush*, consisting of nine songs which she produced and recorded by herself. Since then, she has released four more albums, opened for artists such as the Pixies and Lorde, and sold out shows for her own solo tours. Despite her success, however, Mitski's critical reception has demonstrated her inability to break through the periphery of the indie rock scene, with critics having long portrayed her as the genre's outsider. As an Asian-American woman, her presence in the genre has been persistently seen as an unlikely divergence from the traditional mold of an indie rock musician, a theme which is reflected in her music. Although indie music has traditionally been dominated by white, male artists, I argue that Mitski's music has played a role in renegotiating stereotypes in the genre. By stepping into masculine archetypes while maintaining elements in her music that are typically seen as feminine, Mitski illuminates the ways in which female artists in indie rock have previously been limited while also expanding the space which women have been allowed to occupy within music.

From its inception, indie rock was built primarily around a set of attitudes rather than a specific sound. Inspired by the do-it-yourself ethos of punk, early indie rock artists aimed to preserve the trademarks of rock'n'roll while rejecting its commercial pressures.[1] In an attempt to gain greater creative autonomy, artists began to release their work on independent labels. Furthermore, they embraced amateurism as a form of "authenticity" rather than adopting rock music's reverence for virtuosity. Indie rock came to be characterized as a scene where misfits and rebels

1. Matthew Bannister, "'Loaded': Indie Guitar Rock, Canonism, White Masculinities," *Popular Music* 25, no. 1 (2006): 77–80. www.jstor.org/stable/3877544.



could have a voice and explore sounds and subjects that would not have fit into the traditional, aggressive rock'n'roll mold. However, despite this image of inclusivity, indie rock was unable to fully dissociate itself from rock music's masculine connotations— the genre and its canons have long been comprised of primarily male musicians. When listing the best indie rock artists of all time, rock guides most commonly cite all-male bands such as The Smiths, Pearl Jam, or R.E.M., while female rock performers are scarcely mentioned. This male-dominated hegemony has received pushback in the past, with movements such as Riot Grrrl fighting for a more active role for women within the rock scene. Unfortunately, these movements have been limited in their success. For example, although Riot Grrrl successfully empowered young women to claim space in a realm where they had previously been invisible, the movement has been widely criticized for excluding women who did not belong to its white, middle-class demographic.[2] Thus, indie rock has remained a predominantly homogeneous scene in which women or people of color are perceived as an anomaly.

One of the ways in which this gender divide has been upheld is through the prevailing notion of *rockism*, the belief that music should be valued based on principles of authenticity, innovation, and originality.[3] Historically, this subjective evaluation system has functioned to position masculine genres and qualities as meaningful, while deeming those perceived as feminine as superficial or trivial. Within the rock genre, these gendered biases manifest through the ways in which artists are deemed authentic or original. Physical displays of aggression, spectacle, and bravado are often seen as hallmarks of a "true" musician, allowing masculinity to be associated with virtuosity and femininity with artifice.[4] For example, bands such as the Rolling Stones and Led Zeppelin, who are often heralded as rock's heroes, were praised for their distinct

2. Addie Shrodes, "The 'Race Riot' Within and Without 'The Grrrl One'; Ethnoracial Grrrl Zines' Tactical Construction of Space" (B.A. thesis, University of Michigan, 2012), 65.

3. Max McKenna, "Reactionary Rockism: The Dangerous Obsession with 'Authenticity' in Indie Rock," *Popmatters*, August 13, 2018, www.popmatters.com/reactionary-rockism-2595467402.html.

4. Marion Leonard, *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock, Discourse and Girl Power* (UK: Routledge, 2017), 43-50.

performance styles which featured exaggerated displays of physicality and sexuality. Through this framework, the status quo is maintained in which male musicians are assumed to be rock's true innovators while female musicians are seen as mere imitators.

Against this backdrop, it becomes apparent why Mitski is often regarded as indie's "underdog to root for."[5] Having spent the majority of her career producing songs, booking tours, and promoting her music herself, Mitski experienced first-hand the many barriers of entry that remain for women in music. As a young girl, she never considered a career in music due to the lack of female Asian-American musicians, once saying, "I got a really late start playing music because I didn't grow up seeing anyone who looked like me, or had my background."[6] Even after she began releasing songs, she found that this lack of representation impacted the way that she was perceived as a musician. When booking her own shows, for example, she recalls having to sell out small venues before being allowed to play larger ones, "despite seeing indie rock bands of four white dudes being allowed to play these venues without having to prove anything."[7] Her songs, which typically hover around the three-minute mark, also reflect this idea of having to prove her value as an artist. In a 2018 interview, she explained, "I've never been someone who is listened to [...] I learned from a young age to be concise because there's a very small window for me to grab someone's attention."[8] Unlike her male counterparts, Mitski had to constantly fight to be heard.

In her music, Mitski continues to confront ideas about who "belongs" in indie rock. This is most explicit in her song "Your Best American Girl," the lead single on her album *Puberty 2* (2016). Featuring a catchy melody and lyrics that describe an ill-fated love, the song at first

5. Suzy Exposito, "Mitski Is an Underdog Worth Rooting For," *Suzy X.*, November 21, 2014, https://suzyx.wordpress.com/2014/11/21/mitski-is-an-underdog-worth-rooting-for/.

6. Daniel Kohn, "Mitski's Indie Honesty: 'Hype Doesn't Play My Shows,'" *The Village Voice*, June 11, 2015, https://www.villagevoice.com/2015/06/11/mitskis-indie-honesty-hype-doesnt-play-my-shows/.

7. Ryan Bradford, "Mitski Shakes up the Indie-Rock Scene," *San Diego City Beat*, April 11, 2017, https://www.sdcitybeat.com/archive/mitski-shakes-up-the-indie-rock-scene/article_86db64b6-6bce-59c2-b25b-668581c1974f.html.

8. Emma Finamore, "Being Her Own Cowboy," *The Line of Best Fit*, August 14, 2018, thelineofbestfit.com/features/longread/mitski-being-her-own-cowboy-interview-2018.



sounds like it might more fittingly belong to the pop genre. However, as the song continues, the background drums and fuzzy guitar gradually build, becoming more urgent until culminating in a wall of sound at the chorus which is similar to that featured heavily in classic indie rock. At the same time, Mitski sings "Your mother wouldn't approve of how my mother raised me / But I do, I think I do / And you're an all-American boy / I guess I couldn't help trying to be your best American girl." Through the timing of these two elements, the song has been interpreted as being, "...in direct conversation with the very notion of the indie rock canon."[9] This idea is further emphasized in the song's music video, in which Mitski is shown flirting with the "all-American boy" her lyrics reference before he rejects her for someone else. For a moment, Mitski watches the two of them, looking despondent and confused. However, in a few frames the narrative changes as she begins to kiss her own hand, and the object of her affection shifts to become herself. In doing so, she emphatically rejects the idea of changing aspects of yourself to win over someone's acceptance or love and instead embraces her own identity.

Mitski's refusal to shy away from aspects of her identity can be seen throughout her entire catalog. Despite having negative connotations within rock, she has previously described her music as unquestionably feminine, albeit not in the conventional sense. In one interview with the Guardian, she explains, "When I say feminine album, immediately the perception is that it must be soft and lovely, but I mean feminine in the violent sense. Desiring, but not being able to define your desire, wanting power but being powerless and blaming it on yourself, or just hurting yourself as a way to let out the aggression in you."[10] This can be seen most clearly in her live performances and her lyrics, which constantly switch between intimate and soft to violent and aggressive. During her shows, for example, Mitski will often open with a bloodcurdling scream before launching into lyrics about "kisses like pink cotton candy" and "killer heels." These hints of harshness are also exaggerated through the

9. Jillian Mapes, "Mitski: Puberty 2," *Pitchfork*, June 22, 2016, pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/21970-puberty-2/.

10. Alexandra Pollard, "Indie-Rock Star Mitski: 'I'm Waiting for Everyone to Decide to Hate Me'," *The Guardian*, August 23, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/aug/23/indie-rock-star-mitski-new-album-rave-reviews-japanese-american-songwriter.

production of her songs. When creating her most recent album, *Be the Cowboy*, she stopped polishing off vocal flaws or doubling the vocals in order to create a sound which she describes as "brash, [...] not soft and giving–– all the sounds are sort of opinionated."[11] Through this combination of elements which are often deemed masculine with those that are overtly feminine, Mitski creates a sense of dissonance in her music that tends to disarm the listener and subvert expectations. In doing so, she highlights how only a small subset of this full range of emotions is expected from women.

Mitski further explores gender biases in her song "Geyser," which she wrote about her relationship with music. The song begins softly as Mitski croons "You're my number one / You're the one I want," personifying music as an unconventional lover. As the song continues, however, the subdued sounds of the organ and strings in the background gradually build as drums and guitars are slowly layered in. Finally, at the chorus, the song breaks into a violent crescendo as Mitski sings "Though I'm a geyser, feel it bubbling from below / Hear it call, hear it call, hear it call to me, constantly." In the music video, Mitski is featured on the beach singing into the camera. Moments before the chorus, she smirks at the camera before turning and running away. In what appears as a fit of madness, Mitski begins screaming the lyrics and collapses to the sand, crawling along the shore before desperately digging at the sand. Seen in the context of her relationship to music, this song and music video can be interpreted as a reaction to descriptions of her music as autobiographical or confessional. Despite her control over the work she produces, her creative agency is often ignored by critics. Mitski has previously commented on this view of her work, saying in an interview with Time Out:

> It just baffles me how so many men can't imagine that I own my brain, or that the things I make come from me. It's not that some light from God shines through me and I don't understand what's going on. 'It just pours out of her, it's just her being honest.' But I'm like 'I worked on this, this is what I study!' How can you take everything that I've painstakingly crafted and say, 'it's just her diary.'[12]

11. Finamore, "Being Her Own Cowboy."

12. Ro S, "Mitski Talks Her New Album, the Ugliness in Ourselves and Outsider Art," *TimeOut*, June 17, 2016, https://www.timeout.com/newyork/music/mitski-talks-her-new-album-the-ugliness-in-ourselves-and-outsider-art.



In the "Geyser" music video, this idea can be seen in the contrast between Mitski's theatricality and her knowing, controlled gazes at the camera. Thus, through the song, Mitski critiques how women are denied claims of originality.

This idea of subverting gender expectations lies at the very heart of *Be the Cowboy*. When discussing her inspiration for the album title, Mitski explains that she wanted to "...be the cowboy you wish to see in the world … What would a white guy say? What would a swaggering cowboy riding into town do in this situation?"[13] For Mitski, being the cowboy means having the freedom to make the music that she wants and to be unapologetically herself. By stepping into celebrated male archetypes, she refuses to conform to tropes and demonstrates how our ideas of gender are moldeable and changeable.

One could argue, however, that Mitski's success reflects how the landscape in music has changed. In the last decade, *rockism* has begun to lose its dominance in music criticism, giving rise to poptimism. Poptimism maintains the belief that pop music is just as valuable and deserving of serious critique as rock and rejects the image of pop as simple or devoid of meaning.[14] With this shift, poptimism's love of artificiality and the synthetic has come to overshadow old ideals of authenticity, allowing artists a greater freedom to explore theatricality and personas. Musicians such as Lana Del Rey, who was initially criticized as a fraud when she began releasing songs in 2012, are now embraced for their artistic vision. Thus, through this shift, authenticity is losing its value as a means to justify who "belongs" in indie rock, allowing for greater representation of female artists.

Despite this shift in the way that music is valued, institutional change has yet to follow. Advances in technology have made it easier for aspiring artists to produce and record their own music, which has allowed more female musicians to circumvent traditional barriers to

13. Raisa Bruner, "Mitski Is Here for the Outsiders in Music," *Time*, August 9, 2018, time.com/5362180/mitski-be-the-cowboy/.

14. Alex Abad-Santos and Constance Grady, "How Lana Del Rey's Career Explains a Huge Shift in the Way We Think about Pop Stars," *Vox*, October 30, 2019, www.vox.com/culture/2019/10/30/20853231/lana-del-rey-authenticity-career-norman-fucking-rockwell.

entry and is reflected in the increased numbers of women in the top charts of popular genres. However, women's contributions to music are still devalued or are left unacknowledged.[15] For example, male artists still dominate music festival lineups and are more likely to receive awards for their work.[16] Additionally, recent controversies with female artists being denied ownership over their work, such as Solange being called the face of her work while her producer was attributed the credit for her success, demonstrate how women still struggle to be seen as auteurs. Thus, although Mitski has helped broaden the role that women have been allowed to occupy in music, change is still needed. In order to improve the diversity of voices heard, we must consider what biases and barriers of entry into the music industry still exist for marginalized groups.

15. Stacy L. Smith, Marc L. Choueiti, and Katherine L. Pieper, "Inclusion in the Recording Studio? Gender and Race/Ethnicity of Artists, Songwriters & Producers across 600 Popular Songs from 2012-2017" (USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, January 2018), http://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/inclusion-in-the-recording-studio.pdf.

16. Rob Mitchum and Diego Garcia-Olano, "Tracking the Gender Balance of This Year's Music Festival Lineups," *Pitchfork*, May 1, 2018, pitchfork.com/features/festival-report/tracking-the-gender-balance-of-this-years-music-fe stival-lineups.



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# *Waitress*! Equalitea And Pie, Please

Irena Huang

The Broadway musical *Waitress* is a feminist triumph. Based on the 2007 film of the same name and adapted from a book by Jessie Nelson, the storyline went through multiple iterations before making a colorful splash on Broadway in April 2016 at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre. It's the first musical in Broadway history with an all-female primary creative team, scored by six-time Grammy Award-nominated singer-songwriter Sara Barellies, choreographed by Lorin Latarro, and directed by Tony Award-winner Diane Paulus.[1] The show has been criticized as predictable, cliche, and too reliant on character tropes, reflecting its characters as shallow and stereotypically feminine. At the heart of the show is Jenna, originally played onstage by Tony Award-winner Jessie Mueller, a virtuoso pie baker stuck in an abusive marriage and dealing with an unintentional pregnancy. Supported by her two best friends and fellow waitresses, she ultimately aspires to win a pie-baking contest, the financial reward from which would enable her to leave her husband.[2] Jenna, a [quote the song] woman, [address the affair in the context of her character arc -- talk about her complexity and pursuit of happiness] She's supported by her two best friends, fellow waitresses at the diner, and her story is told in full; a beautiful portrayal of a woman who is lonely, reckless, kind, scared, and strong. *Waitress* has been written off as modestly charming and void of dramatic altitude, yet I argue that the musical is dynamic, powerful, and champions feminist

1. Mark A. Robinson, "Long-Running Hit Waitress Begins Final Six Months on Broadway," *Broadway Direct*, July 16, 2019, https://broadwaydirect.com/long-running-hit-waitress-begins-final-six-months-on-broadway/.

2. Danielle Feder, "Feminism and Femininity in Broadway's Waitress," *HowlRound Theatre Commons*, August 2, 2016, https://howlround.com/feminism-and-femininity-broadways-waitress.



ideals, both behind-the-scenes and on the Broadway stage. The creative team has made history with its record number of female representation at the executive level.[3] While theatre critics are right to point out that on the surface the musical follows a cliche plot with familiar characters, the production is a powerful piece of feminist artwork because it provides a space that allows audiences to see stereotypes turned on their heads and emphasizes the main characters that are each defined separately from a man, have the autonomy to make both good and bad decisions, and are relentlessly supportive of each other.

In the summer of 2019, I packed my bags and moved to New York City for the three-month break. I decided to see *Waitress* my first weekend in the city and I was blown away. As soon as I stepped foot inside the lobby of the Brooks Atkinson Theatre located in the heart of Manhattan, I was hit with the smell of freshly baked pie, welcoming me into the diner where Jenna finds escape from her troubles. Pies frame the proscenium in spinning display towers, the stage curtain features the familiar criss-cross pattern of a fruit pie, and theatregoers are able to purchase miniature pies before taking their seats, evoking a feminine, domestic space before the show even begins.[4] The production's pie-centric branding cites both Jenna's passion and her traditional duties as an American wife. The saying "A way to a man's heart is through his stomach," applies to the characters in the show, as well as the audience members; when Jenna bakes a pie, her married gynecologist, Dr. Pomatter, falls in love with her, as does her invested audience. The show's credited Pie Consultant Stacy Donnelly bakes the pies that the cast eats on stage, as well as the mini pies which are sold at the show; this new creative role furthers a feminist agenda by affirming that domestic arts are indeed arts, legitimate and culture-defining.

*Waitress*, although fun and creative, does follow a familiar plot: A small-town girl, after going through some hoops and hurdles, finally breaks free and lives independently. The musical has received criticism for having a "chick-flick plot," and being a "tourist-trap rom-com that has

3. Sloane Crosley, "Inside the Making of Waitress, the First Broadway Musical with an All-Female Creative Team," Vanity Fair, November 14, 2018, https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2016/04/waitress-broadway-musical.

4. Feder, "Feminism and Femininity in Broadway's Waitress."

little to offer;" according to Terry Teachout for the Wall Street Journal, it is as "familiar as a cafeteria salad."[5] He assumes that artistically significant musical theatre has to be unfamiliar and challenging, but that is simply not the case. A common device implemented in musicals is the "marriage trope," a term coined by Raymond Knapp, which refers to the success or failure of a character's personal relationships serving as a marker for the resolution or continuation of other issues at large.[6] The "marriage trope" is commonly used in American musicals to clue the audience into the bigger picture, and *Waitress* is no exception. In fact, the solidification of the American musical as a revered art form stemmed from the need to define and refine what precisely it meant to be American.[7] Personally, I believe being American means fighting for equality amongst all people. In 2020, we will be celebrating the 100th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment, which gave women the right to vote. However, the fight for gender equality is ongoing, and messages still need to be heard about what uplifts women and what suppresses them. Musicals bring audiences together within a constructed community and sends those audiences into a larger community armed with songs to be shared, which is what Waitress achieves.[8] *Waitress* is domestic, homey, and familiar in its American comforts. My experience of this show compelled me to tell all of my friends and colleagues about it, sharing the songs from its soundtrack to all of my social media platforms and showering the message with praise.

Jenna opens the show crooning "sugar, butter, flour" like a lullaby, introducing a major musical motif and establishing herself as the unhappy protagonist clinging to her one talent: baking pies. At the urging of her best friends, Becky and Dawn, Jenna takes a pregnancy test, which confirms her greatest fear: she is pregnant with her husband's child. The

5. Terry Teachout, "'Waitress' Review: Skimpy on the Filling," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 25, 2016, https://www.wsj.com/articles/waitress-review-skimpy-on-the-filling-1461619765.

6. Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2009), .

7. Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), .

8. Ibid.



central conflict of the musical is domestic abuse, shown through Jenna's husband's verbal and emotional cruelty and his threats of physical violence. Though he is unable to hold a job, Earl believes that Jenna's tips belong to him, even chastising her for not making enough and taking her earnings to spend as he pleases.[9] Earl takes every dollar Jenna earns and goes so far as to make her promise him she won't love their child more than she loves him. As the musical reaches its climax, Earl discovers and confiscates Jenna's stash of money intended to aid in her escape. She is unable to compete in the neighboring county's pie contest and surrenders to her prison-like marriage. At her lowest point, Jenna sings "She Used to be Mine," an emotionally intricate song through which Jenna analyzes her inner conflicts and complexities: "She is messy, but she's kind / She is lonely most of the time." She acknowledges her mistakes, her flaws, and the regret she's allowed to puncture her self-esteem.[10] She admits that having a child was not how she envisioned her life panning out, telling her unborn child, "You're not what I asked for / If I'm honest, I know I would give it all back / For a chance to start over and rewrite an ending or two." By the end of the song, Jenna finds her voice and the will to fight for a brighter future, "regenerating the woman within her," in a raw portrayal of feminism taking shape.[11] Jessie Mueller's performance of this gut-wrenching song features a melody that soars, then recedes in waves, becoming almost a whisper at times. In the climactic bridge, Mueller sings, "Growing stronger each day 'til it finally reminds her / To fight just a little, to bring back the fire in her eyes / That's been gone, but used to be mine," hitting a high note during the word "finally" and sustaining a powerful belt on the words "fire" and "mine." The emphasis on these words evokes the nuances of self-doubt, loneliness, and helplessness in situations of female disenfranchisement. To admit powerlessness yet

9. Paul Taylor, "Waitress, Adelphi Theatre, Review: 'This Show Is the Real Deal,'" *The Independent*, March 8, 2019, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/waitress-adelphi-theatre-london-review-a8811911.html.

10. Charles Isherwood, "Review: Jessie Mueller Serves a Slice of Life (With Pie) in Sara Bareilles's 'Waitress,'" *The New York Times*, April 24, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/25/theater/review-jessie-mueller-serves-a-slice-of-life-with-pie-in-sara-bareilless-waitress.html.

11. Ibid.

pledge to fight back and become stronger is a stand for feminism. My heart is swept up along with the song and I yearn for Jenna to find the happy ending she deserves.

In a New York Times conversation piece between Alexis Soloski and Laura Collins-Hughes, the musical was repeatedly denounced for tolerating bullying behavior and Jenna's attitude change following the birth of her baby being "creepy and reactionary," because, for the majority of the show, Jenna seems to not want the baby at all.[12] I argue that that is due to her explicit fear of becoming a bad mother and having to raise her child in an abusive household. Once Jenna leaves Earl, it is clear that she is a loving, protective mother, as she always would have been. Soloski even states, "That the show is popular with female audiences mystifies me. I don't read it as empowering."[13] The fact that a musical produced by an all-female creative team isn't feminist enough is discouraging; if a similar show was created with men at the forefront, they'd be lauded for at least trying. *Waitress* presents strong female characters who exist independently of and are hindered by men while they are supported by their fellow female confidants. It's disheartening that critics have deemed a musical in which the men exist only in relation to the women as a "dull"and empty failure.[14]

Beyond drawing criticism for the storyline and characters, *Waitress* has also dissuaded some theatre critics with its score. Terry Teachout degrades Sara Bareilles as:

> a not-quite-famous singer-songwriter… [who] has no notion of how to write for the stage. Her tunes are flat and unmemorably unhummable, and she shoves so many words into each stanza that none of them stand out: 'But he could be criminal / Some sort of psychopath who escaped from an institution / Somewhere where they don't have girls / He could have masterminded some way to find me / He could be color blind, how untrustworthy is that?'[15]

Taken from the song "When He Sees Me," these lyrics depict a relatable

12. Laura Collins-Hughes and Alexis Soloski, "Broadway May Not Be So White, but Is It Woman Enough?" *The New York Times*, May 31, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/05/theater/women-on-broadway-a-year-of-living-dangerously.html.

13. Ibid.

14. Teachout, "'Waitress' Review: Skimpy on the Filling."

15. Ibid.



and quirky bout of anxious thoughts that swirl in the mind of Dawn, one of the supporting characters who has her own dating fiascos to worry about, even as she offers emotional support to Jenna. While Teachout deems these lyrics "hard to follow" and claims that, "*Waitress* loses dramatic altitude whenever the characters start singing," I believe the opposite.[16] The lyrics, augmented by the memorable and exciting score and artfully delivered by the actors' performance skills, carry the entire show and establish the foundation for a musical all about putting women first.

While Charles Isherwood, a theatre critic for The New York Times, marks *Waitress* as a "remarkable jukebox musical" with characters as flat as "comic book cartoons," I argue that this is not the case.[17] Not only are all the female characters positively represented as honest and good people, each supporting character has a fleshed-out backstory and arc. Jenna and her coworkers, Becky and Dawn, are a trio of close friends who support each other through their hardships and mistakes. Each woman is fully defined and prioritizes her female friendships over fleeting romantic interests.[18] While Jenna's dealing with the crisis of an unplanned pregnancy and an extramarital affair, Becky has her own torrid love affair with Cal, the manager at the diner. Dawn also dips her toes in the shallow end of the dating pool at the advice of her friends. After much reluctance, she meets Ogie, the only male character to have more than one solo number in the entire musical. His introduction song, "Never Ever Getting Rid of Me," is effervescent and vivacious with electric guitar riffs and playful cymbal crashes, but his pursuit soon becomes aggressive, an edge accentuated by the song's driving rock style: "I will never let you let me leave / I love you means you're never, ever, ever getting rid of me." Ogie represents the same kind of harassment that plagues Jenna and Earl's abusive marriage, and the audience cringes when he refuses to leave the diner where Dawn works after their first date. Once Ogie sings the catchy and frustratingly funny,

16. Teachout, "'Waitress' Review: Skimpy on the Filling."

17. Isherwood, "Review: Jessie Mueller Serves a Slice of Life (With Pie) in Sara Bareilles's 'Waitress.'"

18. Feder, "Feminism and Femininity in Broadway's Waitress."

"Never Ever Getting Rid of Me," his charm and comedic timing softens the hearts of those watching, encouraging the spectators to disregard his disturbing behavior.[19] Later on, Dawn falls in love with him, suggesting the troubling notion that abuse is validated if the abuser seems non-threatening. *Waitress* subtly perpetuates a confounding double standard about a serious issue that women struggle with every day.[20] The musical goes beyond using Dawn and Ogie's relationship as a foil to Jenna and Earl's, presenting a detailed assessment of their relationship that questions whether or not relentless pursuit is acceptable. The show adds texture to the standard narrative, introducing a less recognized type of emotional suffering. While Dawn and Ogie ultimately ending up together may not be a completely satisfying resolution, it can be forgiven as one of the few flaws of the musical. However, *Waitress* still stands as substantial and dense with topics that need to be addressed that bring attention to the women, in the right ways.

I disagree with the claims that Bareilles' tunes are flat or unmemorable or unhummable–– if anything, they're the opposite. Each track swells with creative musical elements that range from the quirkiest of lyrics to the added effects of percussion for comedic timing. The songs in *Waitress* are best described as operating within, "...a pop idiom over an intricately figured rhythmic floor."[21] During "The Negative," Becky and Dawn urge Jenna to take a pregnancy test to the loud and relentless beat of drums and piano keys. During "Bad Idea," Jenna and Dr. Pomatter perform a duet that is racy in terms of choreography and vibrant, musically. The song has a quick tempo and features beautiful harmonies sung by Mueller and Drew Gehling, who originated the role of Dr. Pomatter. It's a tune that is catchy yet classy, offering comedic relief to audiences during especially heavy moments throughout the show. Another track that is also memorable is Fitzgerald's "I Love You Like a Table," which even features creative vocal changes to operatic styles that strikes a chord of laughter within anyone who hears it. He toggles between using his thin, nasally voice to a deeper voice that's thick with resonance. The juxtaposition is

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Taylor, "Waitress, Adelphi Theatre, Review: 'This Show Is the Real Deal.'"



hilarious and makes the track lighthearted, catchy, and memorable. It's as if the songs' staying power is being epitomized to the point of satire in the number "Never Ever Getting Rid of Me."[22] Like the New York Times says, the score is appealing, "...drawing on the sounds of country music reflecting the Southern setting, but also containing more traditional Broadway-pop balladry."[23]

Not only does *Waitress* put forth nuanced, progressive portrayals of women on the stage, the production behind the scenes also actively champions women and is changing the Broadway community. The cast and crew of *Waitress* have always participated in charities and fundraisers, and during Breast Cancer Awareness Month, the show changed the waitresses' iconic blue uniforms to pink ones to bring awareness to the cause.[24] The creators of *Waitress* have intentionally inverted musical theatre conventions to craft a wholly feminist show. Audiences are conditioned to expect female characters that exist only in relation to the typically male protagonist, pushed to the periphery and never thoroughly developed. *Waitress* is the opposite, flipping traditional norms and depicting men on the fringes of a show that revolves around three strong female characters.[25] Becky and Dawn are played by actors Keala Settle and Kimiko Glenn, respectively, both of whom are of Asian/Pacific Islander descent, representing racial diversity without resorting to stereotypes. Becky and Dawn have fully realized character arcs and significant representation in the musical's score.[26] Although gender representation is still extremely skewed in theater professions such as playwriting and directing, *Waitress* is paving the way for more female representation in the echelons of the creative department.[27]

Terry Teachout has stated that, "*Waitress* is a small-scale musical, and it might well have made a somewhat stronger impression had it

22. Ibid.

23. Isherwood, "Review: Jessie Mueller Serves a Slice of Life (With Pie) in Sara Bareilles's 'Waitress'."

24. Robinson, "Long-Running Hit Waitress Begins Final Six Months on Broadway."

25. Feder, "Feminism and Femininity in Broadway's Waitress."

26. Ibid.

27. Sloane Crosley, "Inside the Making of Waitress,"

been done in an off-Broadway house better suited to its modest charms. Probably not much stronger, though: It simply isn't good enough."[28] Yet, the production held its own against juggernaut *Hamilton* and "emerged as both a critical and financial success, recouping its $12 million investment in less than 10 months on Broadway."[29] The show is now playing in London's West End, touring North America, and planning to open in Australia in 2020.[30] While some viewers of *Waitress* might brush it off as a unimpressionable or bland, it presents a powerful and heartfelt portrayal of realistic relationships. It is a feminist victory, both under the spotlight and behind the curtains. It has found a home on Broadway and connected with audiences all around with world, drawing attention to the importance of female friendships and finding strength from within.

28. Teachout, "'Waitress' Review: Skimpy on the Filling."
29. Robinson, "Long-Running Hit Waitress Begins Final Six Months on Broadway."
30. Ibid.



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# Dissonant Ones: The Harmony of Lou Reed and John Cale

Gabriel Deibel

*A note from the editors: As a member of the editorial board, while Gabriel had the chance to review other papers and provide feedback, he was not involved with the selection process for this issue of the journal.*

In the sweltering New York summer of 1965, John Cale, Lou Reed, and Sterling Morrison decided to record six demos in Cale's SoHo apartment.[1] "Heroin," "Venus in Furs," "I'm waiting for the Man," and "All Tomorrow's Parties" were four of the tracks. The folky strums of Morrison's guitar complemented the saw of Cale's droning viola as Lou Reed's harrowing lyrics shone an honest eye on 1960s New York, "I have made a big decision / I'm gonna try to nullify my life / 'Cause when the blood begins to flow / When it shoots up the dropper's neck / When I'm closing in on death." As this example shows, Reed's songwriting was as powerful as it was pessimistic, drudging through the drug-fueled, sex-soaked violence to which Reed was determined to give a voice. Reed made rock music more musically and lyrically complex, artifying it by combining elements of avant-garde, classical, and beat poetry.[2] However, bandmate John Cale's avant-garde sensibilities and fervent push against the sound and style conventions usually associated with traditional pop and classical music gave the Velvet Underground their edge. The ambience and cacophony Cale brought to the songs Reed wrote became integral to the Velvets' influence. It is hard to imagine a song like "Heroin," so harrowing in its performance, without rushing, atonal drone of Cale's viola. Punk rock without "White Light/White Heat" is like a carpenter without a hammer. The blistering feedback and chaotic distortion Cale achieved on that recording influenced countless generations of music

1. Roland Ellis, "July 1st, 1965: The Velvet Underground's First Recordings," *Gaslight Records*, 2015, https://gaslightrecords.com/articles/the-velvet-undergrounds-first-recordings.

2. Ibid.



listeners.[3] Lou Reed crafted songs that dug into the bleak reality of 1960s New York as he casted an objective eye over the world of junkies and sexual deviants, but I argue that the Velvet Underground are one of the most influential musical acts of the 20th century because of John Cale's sonic experimentation, beautifying the harsher tones of feedback and distortion into orchestras of cacophony.

The Velvet Underground's original 1964 lineup consisted of two Syracuse College students, a Welsh avant-garde musician, and an IBM keypuncher. Lou Reed was an inspiring singer-songwriter who studied English literature at Syracuse and was influenced by beat poetry and performers as diverse as Bob Dylan, Booker T. & the M.G.s, Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor.[4] John Cale was a classically trained multi-instrumentalist and graduate of the University of London.[5] Cale's prior involvement with the international art group Fluxus had led him to start creating music in a new minimalist style and under the tutelage of composer LaMonte Young his creativity found the perfect place to flourish.[6] Instead of dressing the song like an arranger often would, Cale sought to define the aura of the recording.[7] Rounding out the band were Sterling Morrison, a college friend of Reeds, and Moe Tucker, percussionist and sister of Morrison's friend. In 1964 the bones of the Velvet Underground were beginning to take form, but by late 1965 Andy Warhol offered them a record contract, an official management deal, and patronage on the condition that German singer Nico would be added as an additional vocalist and frontwoman. During this period of time, the critic Robert Gold wrote on the Velvet Underground and stated, "The band makes a sound that can only be compared to a railroad shunting yard, metal wheels screeching to a halt on the tracks. It's music to go

3. Ibid.

4. Ellen Willis, *Beginning to See the Light; Sex, Hope, and Rock N' Roll* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 89-99.

5. Richard R. Witts, *The Velvet Underground* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 68.

6. Ellen Daniels, "Avant-Garde Grit: John Cale and Experimental Techniques in Popular Music" (M.A. diss., Michigan State University, 2012), 22.

7. Witts, *The Velvet Underground*, 83.

out of your mind to, if that's your bent."[8] Even producers and engineers had trouble understanding what the Velvet's were doing with their music. During the 17-minute recordings of "Sister Ray" for *White Light/White Heat*, engineer Gary Kellgren famously walked out and told the band, "I don't have to *listen to this*. I'll put it in Record, and then I'm *leaving*. When you're done, come get me."[9] Tensions would eventually rise between Cale and Reed and Cale was booted out by the rest of the band due to his desire to direct their sound towards the avant-garde.[10]

Both Reed and Cale were interested in doing as much sonically and narratively with as little as possible; as Reed would say, "One chord is fine. Two chords is pushing it. Three chords and you're into jazz."[11] Reed was the primary songwriter, a lyricist whose songs displayed rich thought with few words, as in "Sunday Morning": "Sunday morning brings the dawning / It's just a restless feeling by my side / Early dawning, Sunday morning / It's just the wasted years so close behind." His objective and respectful depictions of characters prompted Warhol superstar Candy Darling to praise Reed's depiction of her, saying, "Lou Reed made me immortal," in his songs "Candy Says" and "Walk on the Wild Side."[12] Whether talking about heroin, amphetamines, prostitution, gender dysphoria, love, religion, or addiction, Reed's lyrics represented the reality he was living in, enabling him to turn the social taboos of his time into unconventional lyrical subjects.

Behind the scenes however, Cale was the architect of what defined the Velvet's sound. Cale and Reed were constantly in conflict with each other over the direction of the band, and as Cale said, "There were a lot

8. Robert Gold, "The Velvet Underground at the Shrine," in *All Yesterdays' Parties: The Velvet Underground in Print, 1966-1971*, edited by Clinton Heylin (New York: Hachette Books, 2009), 64.

9. *Lou Reed: Rock & Roll Heart, An American Masters Special*, directed by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders, PBS American Masters, 1998.

10. Daniels, "Avant-Garde Grit: John Cale and Experimental Techniques in Popular Music," 47.

11. Sam Parker, "Remembering Lou Reed: Ten Quotes from a Rock God," *Esquire*, October 20, 2013, https://www.esquire.com/uk/culture/news/a5092/remembering-lou-reed-10-quotes-from-a-true-rock-god/.

12. Colin Moynihan, "From the Archives, a Portrait of a Pop Art Muse," *New York Times*, February 24, 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/25/arts/design/25cand.html.



of soft songs and I didn't want that many soft songs… I was trying to get something big and grand and Lou was fighting against that. He wanted pretty songs."[13] Cale was an outsider when it came to American rock n' roll as he felt the genre was not as stimulating as art music, saying things like, "The avant-garde makes more sense to me."[14] Cale's penchant for art music and instrumental experimentation led him to introduce many of the band's iconic sounds. For example, the prominent use of celesta in "Sunday Morning" was Cale's idea, adding a lullaby-esque ambiance not present in the initial recording.[15] Cale's arrangement of the song "All Tomorrow's Parties" made use of a prepared piano, which pioneered the effect in popular music.[16] The consistent, repetitive hammering of piano keys counters Reed's loose arpeggiated guitar picking, giving the piece an energetic kick and a sense of momentum. "The Black Angel's Death Song," co-written by Reed and Cale, the recording is dominated by Cale's electric viola and the loud bursts of feedback he created by hissing into the microphone.[17] In the context of a rock band, the viola would usually have to be amplified, but Cale's use of the instrument gave the song the grandness of a symphony. He orchestrated chaos and gave Reed's songs a dressing of dissonance that was yet unheard of in most rock groups, a dissonance would have been absent if Reed had someone more conventional as producer and arranger. Cale's use of dissonance and distortion both countered and complimented the prettiness of Reed's songs.

The legendary culmination of Reed and Cale's partnership is *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, the 1967 record that was so influential, American online music magazine Pitchfork listed it as the best record of

13. Witts, *The Velvet Underground*, 68.

14. John Cale, "Of Anger and Twitching: An Interview with John Cale," interview by Andrew Phillips, *Popmatters*, January 26, 2006, https://www.popmatters.com/cale-john-060109-2496107865.html

15. Eric Hoffman, "Examinations: An Examination of John Cale," Mental Contagion, accessed December 9, 2019, http://www.mentalcontagion.com/mcarchive/examinations/examinations0409.html.

16. Tim Mitchell, *Sedition and Alchemy: A Biography of John Cale* (London: Peter Owen Publishers, 2003), 14.

17. Daniels, "Avant-Garde Grit: John Cale and Experimental Techniques in Popular Music," [page number].

the 1960s.[18] "Sunday Morning," and "Heroin," are songs so brilliant in their simplicity and social commentary that they have withstood the test of time and remain cornerstones for both indie rock and punk. Blistering feedback, atonal sweepings of viola, arrhythmic percussion, off-key singing, and Lou Reed's deadpan vocal delivery were all considered unconventional qualities in music for the time. This album redefined not only what rock'n'roll could be, but also redefined what could be considered listen-able and created a world of opportunities to hybridize the avant-garde with rock n' roll.

The track "Heroin" is a particularly chilling piece, so brutal and real that I remember myself drifting through the hallways of my house, both a flood of warmth and a crippling sense of detachment overtook me, it was unlike anything I had ever heard or felt. "Heroin" opens the second half of *The Velvet Underground & Nico* with harrowing beauty. Alternating between arpeggiated D and G chords, Lou Reed and Sterling Morrison wind their guitars through Maureen Tucker's hypnotic floor tom. Cale joins with his piercing electric viola drone, permeating the soundscape with a surreal ambience. Within the first stanza Reed overtly references drug use: "When I put a spike into my vein / And I tell you things aren't quite the same / When I'm rushing on my run / And I feel just like Jesus' son," blessed as his father, but without the sacrifice. Instead of a verse-chorus structure, the piece follows a cyclical, four-part structure of varying tempo, which mimics the high of the narrator, frantically dancing between waiting for a fix and the rush of euphoria associated with intravenous drug use. At around 4'20", Reed sings, "Heroin, be the death of me/ Heroin, it's my wife and it's my life." The piece collapses into a fiery wall of dissonance and feedback. Cale's viola breaks through the mix with incredible passion, darting and droning across the track in a freeform atonal sweep. The cacophony and ambience of Cale's viola gives "Heroin" its distinctive sound, building the track from its Dylan-esque folky roots to a far more experimental, almost pseudo-spiritual experience.

"White Light/White Heat" is a gritty, honky-tonk rock'n'roll

18. "200 Best Albums of the 1960s," *Pitchfork*, August 22, 2017, .https://pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/the-200-best-albums-of-the-1960s/.



song, born of disorder and avant-rock minimalism, noisier and more distorted than anything the Velvets had previously released. Opening their second album, 1968's *White Light/White Heat*, the title track is an ode to intravenous amphetamine use, mimicking the frenzy of a meth rush. Reed barrages the listener with lyrical nods to the drug: "(White light) White light goin', messin' up my mind / (White light) And don't you know it's gonna make me go blind / (White heat) Aw, white heat, it tickles me down to my toes / (White light) Ooh, have mercy, while I have it, goodness knows." John Cale drives the 12-bar blues song forward with an intense thumping bass line, that by the end of the piece becomes dissonant and scattered. Lou Reed and Sterling Morrison trade fuzzy guitar lines over Maureen Tucker's crashing cymbals and hypnotic snare hits. Cale would later overdub a monotonal boogie-woogie piano, an almost proto-punk assault on the ears. The final forty seven seconds of the song sees him overwhelm the mix to replicate the auditory effect of speed-use. The song ends as a swirling crash of noise, the cacophonous beauty of which certainly challenged audiences of conventional rock n' roll.

Many retrospective reviews of the Velvets pin Lou Reed as the central figure who pushed their sound into unexplored territory. Reed himself was quoted as saying, "I just keep thinking that when The Velvet Underground first came out with songs like 'Heroin,' we were so savaged for it. Here it is a few decades later, and I have those lyrics published in a book, and I'm giving readings at art museums."[19] Cale does not enjoy the same praise as Reed, even though he sculpted Reed's songs into pieces of experimental bliss . Reed's work endures because it depicts humanity at its most vulnerable, frail yet beautiful. The Velvets music is not considered danceable or catchy, and lacked mass appeal when it was originally released. American music critic and writer for The Village Voice Robert Christgau saw the most appeal in, "...the quietest and most lyrical" of the Velvet songs such as "Candy Says."[20] The simple arpeggiated guitar pickings of "Candy Says." creates an incredibly hypnotizing soundscape,

19. Greg Kot, "The Velvet Underground: As Influential as The Beatles?" BBC, October 21, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20131125-do-the-velvets-beat-the-beatles.

20. Robert Christgau, "Toesucker Blues: Robert Christgau's Farewell Salute to Lou Reed," *Spin*, October 28, 2013, https://www.spin.com/2013/10/lou-reed-robert-christgau-toesucker-blues/.

but is hardly as interesting or as original as a piece of music like "Heroin." Many of the songs off of their later albums, *The Velvet Underground* (1969) and *Loaded* (1970), lack that grit that Cale gave the Velvets, as the songs become more digestible, but lose their distinct colors.

Cale's contributions to the band are far more conceptual and driven by the needs of an artist to expand his own listening consciousness. A song such as "Heroin" wouldn't hold the same uneasy tension or chaotic climaxes without the instrumental contributions of John Cale. Reed had been building his legacy upon the shoulders of his literary idols, like William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Delmore Schwartz, who had already famously dissected drug addiction, homosexuality, and death throughout their works.[21] However, Cale's sounds had never been utilized in rock'n'roll before. Dissonance, though not a new concept, had never been so effortlessly promoted through a pop record. Musical artists who had been influenced by the sounds of the Velvet Underground such as Patti Smith, The Stooges, and The Modern Lovers all sought out Cale as a producer.[22] Patti Smith's record *Horses* (1975) owes much of its sound to insane artistic contributions of Cale as Smith would go on to say that her work with Cale, "transcended anything I ever did before. He was like -- getting into my body ... he has all this warmth in him and he gets inside you and he goes through all the pain you go through."[23] *Horses* is now considered one of the most influential records of the 20th century and the distinct conflicts of sound present in the music can be attributed to Cale' approach as a producer and arranger, choosing to challenge himself and the listener and push the boundaries of whatever style of music he works on.

August 23rd, 1970 saw Lou Reed on stage at Max's Kansas City, playing what would be his last show with the Velvet Underground. Disenchanted by the band's lack of success and progress, Reed quit the band during their last week of residency at Max's Kansas City. Reed

21. Peter Hartlaub, "How the Beats Helped Build San Francisco's Progressive Future," San Francisco Chronicle, last modified March 12, 2018, https://www.sfchronicle.com/oursf/article/Our-SF-The-Beats-help-build-city-s-progressive-6676634.php.

22. Daniels, "Avant-Garde Grit: John Cale and Experimental Techniques in Popular Music," 48.

23. Ibid.



would move back in with his parents on Long Island, working as a typist for his father's tax accounting firm, before eventually meeting glam rock superstar David Bowie and resurrecting his own career.[24] Although the Velvets have recently been reassessed and their legacy well documented by various lovers of music, it is still important to understand how influential Cale was on the development of rock'n'roll music. Cale instigated the use of dissonance in rock music and expanded the boundaries of musical expression for decades to come; without Cale's work in the Velvets, artists like The Stooges or Patti Smith would not have their recognizable sound.[25] The Velvets' greatness cannot be solely attributed to Lou Reed; instead, it comes from two artistic spirits discovering how to best express themselves. Even in their simple two-chord progressions, the Velvets made a statement by producing songs that sounded so immense, brutal, and raw. Cale's timbral experimentation and creative use of dissonance birthed the sound of one of the 20th century's most important rock groups. Reed and Cale's music will stand the test of time and inspire new generations to pick up instruments and just let it all ring out.

24. Lou Reed, "Interview: Lou Reed on the Velvets, Bowie... and his love of heavy metal," interview by Ian Fortnam, Louder, October 29, 2016, https://www.loudersound.com/features/interview-lou-reed-on-the-velvets-bowie-and-his-love-of-heavy-metal

25. Kurt B. Reighley, "John Cale: The Return of an Underground Icon" Live on KEXP, *NPR*, January 26, 2013, https://www.npr.org/2013/01/26/169729239/john-cale-the-return-of-an-underground-icon.

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# Boy Band: Intersecting Gender, Age, Sexuality, And Capitalism

Grace Li

One Direction's *Midnight Memories* was the first album I owned. I still remember begging my mom to drive me all the way to a Target twenty miles away from our house, just because only that store had "The Ultimate Edition" of the album that included exclusive photos of the band behind the scene, and their signatures and handwritten messages. My thirteen-year old self thought One Direction had written a letter to me. Buying an album by the biggest boy band in the world was a big deal. My mom had never thought I was into music, and she never understood why I suddenly loved an album so much that I would carefully place it at my bedside for the entire month after my purchase. I told her One Direction was different from other artists. They were five British boys—–Harry Styles, Liam Payne, Louis Tomlinson, Niall Horan, and Zayn Malik—– who were just a little older than me and grew up in middle-class families just like mine. However, they became a global phenomenon that defined the pop music of this decade after the judges of the X-factor, a talent show in the UK, put them together as a band, and their songs and personalities had girls around the world in love with them.

My feelings towards One Direction as a thirteen-year-old were typical. The teen boys radiated positivity and lightheartedness from the moment X-Factor put them together, always goofing around together in the public eye. Their songs conveyed their fun-loving and charming personalities, telling adoring girls, "what makes [them] beautiful." They united teenage girls around the world by making us scream and making our hearts break. At the time, I was trapped in a bubble of sexual fantasy, and it was not until today when I realize that I was one of the many young women manipulated by the sexist and capitalist entertainment industry. It also wasn't until my late teen years when I realized that female fans like me were not the only victims—–so were the members of One Direction. In all seriousness, how could men in their 20s still manage to sing, "Baby you light up my world like nobody else," at the end of every single concert? As I followed the rise and fall of the band, and resulting solo career for member Harry Styles, I realized their fans, myself included, their management, and record label seem to disregard the fact that these boys matured and have become men.

Although I relate to female fans who attempt to display their sexual autonomy by fantasizing their relationships with the British heartthrobs, I still believe that "boy band" is not a name for a musical group—–it is a marketing term and a symbol of puberty that directs towards a complex issue involving infantilization, sexuality, and autonomy of boy bands, which are often overlooked by mainstream media. As fame fossilized the boys' public image, they were obligated to sing the same songs since they were sixteen and their persona was orchestrated by their management throughout their entire career, in which they were portrayed as innocent and shallow to their fans, yet treated as money-generating commodities by their record label. My conflicting feelings on this issue and this industry, in which I have been actively following in the past decade on social media and in real life, prompted me to write this paper. One Direction is more than a boy band because not only do they define young women of Generation Z's taste and desire, but they also embody the intersections between gender, age, sexuality, and capitalism in the music industry. From worshipping a Harry Styles cutout back in freshman year of high school to perusing articles about the band on Rolling Stone after their break-up, I analyze from the perspective of a fan how the behind-the-scenes events—–constant pressure derived from their female fans who indulged themselves in pubertal fantasy, silent yet sophisticated manipulation by the management and record label due to the nature of their capitalist industry, and simply the struggles of growing up and becoming adults who deserve to be free—–affected the rise and fall of one of the most influential bands in this decade.

The idea of "boy band" in popular culture originated in the 1960s, when teenage girls started the global movement called "Beatlemania," an era in which girls would howl and scream and throw jellybeans at George

Harrison to showcase their affection.[1] Young girls followed the four boys wherever they went, holding signs that said cheesy all-capitalized messages along the lines of "BEATLES PLEASE STAY HERE 4-EVER" and shrieking at the band as "She Loves You" started playing. Those female fans, , also marked the beginning of "Teenyboppers," a promiscuous term that is "applied indiscriminately to fans of performers like the oh-so-cute-and-dreamy boy bands."[2] In particular, music critics who apparently "know better" agree that "what unites [Teenyboppers] is their bad taste."[3] Boy band music is perceived as being feminine, since their songs are far from being musically complex and merely symbolize an undeveloped skeleton that is puberty. One Direction is conceived as a modern day parallel to the Beatles. Same charming British accent, same fanatical Teenybopper fans who stalked them from Manchester to São Paulo, and same bubblegum hits that monopolized Billboard (think "She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah" by the Beatles and "You don't know you're beautiful, oh oh" by One Direction)—the boys of One Direction were destined to be tied to teenage girls and their silly, shallow, boy-crazy stereotypes from the very beginning.

Despite Sony's contribution to One Direction's global success, the band was a manufactured commodity of their management and record label, who limited the band members' autonomy by manipulating their on-screen persona and portraying them as ignorant boys in the heat of puberty. All the band members came up in the public eye on the British talent show, the X-Factor, in 2010 when they were merely students like thousands of other contestants. As a result, the career of One Direction was transparent and monitored by the public ever since the band was created, leading to them "being perceived as subservient to the industry and management demands."[4] As contestants of the show, they posted

1. Norma Coates, "Teenyboppers, Groupies, and Other Grotesques: Girls and Women and Rock Culture in the 1960s and Early 1970s," *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2003): 10, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-1598.2003.tb00115.x

2. Ibid, 4.

3. Ibid.

4. Kai Arne Hansen, "Fashioning a Post Boy Band Masculinity: On the Seductive Dreams-cape of Zayn's Pillowtalk," *Popular Music and Society*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2016: 196 doi:10.1080/03 007766.2016.1242994.



weekly "Video Diaries," in which they recorded behind-the-scenes footage, where they fooled around and made jokes at each other—things that teenage boys do in their free time. Gaining almost half a million views, these videos were merely part of the marketing strategy that gave female fans an impression that One Direction was innocent, free from drugs and alcohol, and just like their guy friends at school. The uniqueness in the case of this band was their frankness, contrary to their 90s counterparts' sugar-coated perfection, but fans did not realize that it was their management who ironically created the band's honest image. This marketing succeeded because they captured the selling point—teendom of the band members themselves. One Direction, a "boy" band, was a representation of sustained adolescence, which conveyed "promises of a suspended utopia in which the playfulness of childhood carried over into adult life."[5] Us Teenybopper fans were exactly stuck in between childhood and adulthood, starting to develop romantic emotions with guys, but had not had many relationships. And then we saw Harry Styles, the goofy and flirty bakery boy-next-door with luxurious curly hair and charming emerald eyes, on the television. Instantly, we were hooked by him. If Harry wasn't your cup of tea, they had four more options—the responsible and caring Liam Payne, the cute blond Niall Horan, the playful and sassy Louis Tomlinson, and last but not least, the mysterious bad boy Zayn Malik. Was it a coincidence that the five boys, who had just met on a talent show, distinctively complemented each other? In reality, their onscreen persona and every single one of their behaviors were a careful manipulation by the judges from the very start. In leaked emails from Sony in 2014, a presentation described Harry Styles as "adorably slow" and revealed that they tried to position Zayn as a "poser" and a "player" and other members as "clever", "cheeky" and "giggly."[6] Their record label not only failed to give them the autonomy that adults deserve but also further objectified and emasculated them by describing them in derogatory adjectives, usually reserved for children. Even when they became adults, the entertainment industry still treated them as innocent

5. Ibid.

6. Amy O'Connor, "Wikileaks Shared Juicy One Direction e-Mails and Directioners Are Freaking Out," *The Daily Edge*, April 17, 2015, www.dailyedge.ie/wikileaks-one-direction-e-mails-fans-reaction-2053049-Apr2015/.

"boys" who could be exploited and fossilized.

Not only did One Direction's management and record label take advantage of their personal freedom, the control over the band's album production also damaged their musical integrity and feminized their reputation in their sexist industry. In the music video of their very first song, "What Makes You Beautiful," the five boys were wearing different colors of flannels and khaki pants while running around on the beach. As the camera gave closer shots to each band member during their solo, they all made direct eye contact with the camera as they showed off their "cheeky" and "giggly" personalities. It really felt as if they were smiling right through the screen at me. In addition to their appearance, the rhythm and lyrics of the song also explained why critics from LA Weekly would dedicate an article to the band, titled "One Direction's 'What Makes You Beautiful': Why This Song Sucks."[7] One Direction was born on television and lived in television, a medium that often exploits the female gaze, which is also portrayed by the media as "the worst of mass culture and crass commercialism."[8] To explain this phenomenon, Coates suggests that the teenage audience of this culture don't know better than to fall for the fake teen idols whose managers and record companies prey on their girlish fantasies.[9] Coates' words indeed summarize the reason that One Direction and their label, decided to make What Makes You Beautiful their first single. I could almost immediately guess that it was a bubblegum Pop song by the heavy, repetitive, yet incredibly catchy drum beats when it started playing. In addition to its consistent uptempo, the song included handclaps at its climax, almost a little too exhilarating and overpowering that either an adult could felt nauseous after playing it eight time or a teenage girl could scream "You don't know you're beautiful" all day long.[10] A random girl also made an appearance in the video, getting closer to a band member each time she interacted with him. She seemed almost fictional as she was not physically present at all times, but the

7. Shea Serrano, et al, "One Direction's 'What Makes You Beautiful': Why This Song Sucks," *LA Weekly*, May 23 2019, www.laweekly.com/one-directions-what-makes-you-beautiful-why-this-song-sucks/.

8. Coates, "Teenyboppers, Groupies, and Other Grotesques," 70.

9. Ibid.

10. Serrano, "Why This Song Sucks."



girls watching the video lived vicariously through her, because she made their girlish fantasies come true by making romantic eye contact with Harry Styles. Not only were the members of One Direction profitable commodities marketed by their management and label, but they were also objects that symbolized puberty and romance for girls. One Direction, therefore, were truly at the bottom of this power pyramid of the capitalist and sexist music industry supply chain.

While One Direction and their Teenybopper fans both suffered from professional and social stigma respectively, One Direction still remained products that their management infantilized and that their fans took pleasure in. The popularity and sensationalism that surrounds boy bands is interpreted through the lens of Jennifer Keishin Armstrong (2017):

> They are one of the few safe outlets (the other is called Twilight) for young women to express their budding sexuality. Explore real-life sex or even just experiment a little with the sexual power of tight pants or a miniskirt, and a teen girl risks slut-shaming. If she goes to a 1-D concert and screams her lungs out, then fantasizes later that night about Liam sneaking into her bedroom—well, girls will be girls.[11]

The reason that boy bands are called boy bands instead of man bands is also simple: they are fossilized at the age when they first became popular because young women, who are also experiencing puberty and have not had much sexual experience, need someone––a symbol–– whom they can't date in real life to satisfy their burgeoning sexual desire without being slut-shamed. Similar to the sexism experienced by those in the entertainment industry, the idolization of boy bands that exist in our society places pressure on impressionable teenage girls to conform to traditional female roles. Despite knowing people who were also big fans of the band, I remember being uncomfortable to tell people outside the "bubble," especially men, that I really, really liked One Direction in eighth grade. I could as if see the judgmental side-eye before I stuttered the name "One Direction." The underlying prejudice against Generation Z Tennyboppers expanded from the mass media to real life. Even though

11. Jennifer Keishin Armstrong, "What's So Feminist About Liking Boy Bands?" *Dame Magazine*, December 9, 2017, www.damemagazine.com/2015/12/21/whats-so-feminist-about-liking-boy-bands/.

I valued the band's music and personalities more than their mere looks, the social norm in American culture of shuttling down anything that teenage girls are fans of, simply because anything related to us appears to be shallow, created a social stigma around associating myself with the band. One Direction was not just fluff––they were only considered so because the masculine culture infantilized them. As a result, they were and would always be "boys." Boy bands like them are no longer just a name in the entertainment industry––they are a profit-generating ideal that the capitalist society creates in order to prey on teenage girls who are eager to develop their sexuality.

Although capitalism manipulates girls in a negative way, it indeed drives them to express sexuality in a revolutionary way. As generations of Teenyboppers, all the way from the era of Beatlemania, scream their lungs out and fearlessly show that girls just want to have fun, they also assert "'an active, powerful sexuality by the tens of thousands [of girls],' enacted in a way that was more revolutionary than rebellious." They have a fantasized relationship with John Lennon and Liam Payne, but this relationship also has a distinct quality in that it does not direct toward marriage. Their affection to the boys is purely sexual, not pertaining to tradition and "the tedium of marriage to a crew-cut boy from high school." As much as I appreciate this new perspective on female autonomy, it is still subjected to the dominating masculinity and the infantilization of boy bands. Indeed, the display of Teenyboppers in Beatlemania and the era of One Direction was purely sexual, because they could never see the band members as romantic partners since the boys lacked certain masculine traits. Harry Styles' luxurious hair was a symbol of sexual fantasy, but he was not the boy young women would marry because long hair is perceived as feminine.[12] Therefore, within the heterosexual fanbase of One Direction, Harry Styles was still the sixteen-year-old boy who could tie his hair into a bun––like what female fans themselves do every morning. His feminine traits create a neutral aura which suggests that despite his gender identity, he resembles the fans in certain ways as well. Perhaps claiming Teenyboppers' behaviors are revolutionary is an

12. Merrill Fabry, "Long Hair for Women, Short Hair for Men: How Did That Start?" *Time*, June 16 2016, https://time.com/4348252/history-long-hair/.



overstatement, because this female autonomy practiced in Beatlemania and the bubble of boy bands is the only form in American society where young women are allowed to be sexual. Yet in the broader context of capitalism, the management and record label are the agencies who still control the same bubble of sexual fantasy.

"I'm not in a boy band anymore––I'm in a man band now," says Harry Styles in his most recent Saturday Night Live monologue, four years after One Direction went on an indefinite hiatus.[13] Looking like a rock star on the show in an all Gucci suit with his still silky but more trimmed hair and growing mustache, the former One Direction heartthrob marked his sign of the times––he is no longer the boy in a white t-shirt and jeans known for his slick back hair, smiling on the cover of the first album I ever owned from six years ago. As he jokingly recounted the stories from the old days, thanking Simon Cowell for growing the band "in those test tubes," I wonder what the bitter reality behind his humor actually looked like. Being the pubertal symbols for Generation Z Teenyboppers, he and his band mates carried the boy band legacy and attracted teenage girls from all over the world, but the sacrifice for their commercial success was the unspoken exploitation, feminization, and infantilization by Simon Cowell and his management. As we reach the end of the decade that started the #MeToo movement, perhaps it is time to continue our efforts by reexamining the music and entertainment industry who discriminate against both men and women by pitting them against each other; perhaps it is time for young women to express their emotions without being afraid of judgements; and perhaps it is time for boy band members to demand the overdue autonomy that they deserve as adults.

13. Saturday Night Live, "Harry Styles Monologue - SNL," Youtube video, 4:45, November 16, 2019, https://youtu.be/es7jXKXzW-Q.

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# A Possible Resolution for the Complicated Feelings Revolving Around Tyler, the Creator

Isabel Nakoud

When I first started this paper I thought I'd like to use the lenses of gender and sexuality to try and figure out just who Tyler, the Creator is. I noticed that authors who took up Tyler's discography as a topic for analysis admittedly regretted their decision, or even resented it. I quickly learned from the mistakes of these journalists and accepted that Tyler does not wish or intend to be understood, and so I will respect that. Nonetheless, Tyler has chosen to create in a time when the music industry is rapidly changing. Given his leadership of the culture of today's internet generation, his relationship to social politics cannot be ignored. Right before our eyes, the socio-political climate in the US has drastically changed, especially in regards to conversations of identity, gender, and sexuality. Amidst this change we find Tyler Okonma, who has always been vocal about gender and identity, and so it's curious to me how his discography sits within the socio-political timeline of this decade. Throughout his discography, Tyler has matured considerably and so has his portrayal of masculinity; I demonstrate Tyler's growth as an artist through an analysis of two distinct songs at both ends of his career—"Yonkers" and "A BOY IS A GUN*." Ultimately, I argue that Tyler, the Creator is both a product of and vehicle for the creation of a new black masculinity that has resonated within contemporary hip-hop, a genre curbed by its infamous anti-LGBTQ attitudes and toxic masculinity.

## Meet Tyler

Tyler Okonma grew up in Ladera Heights, California, on the outskirts of Los Angeles. Tyler's first successful venture in music was through his founding of LA Collective Odd Future, which has since broken up but was popular amongst the so-called Internet Generation and was critically acclaimed for their music—featuring other successful artists today, such as Frank Ocean and Earl Sweatshirt. The group confronted their teenage angst by entering the world of hip-hop through their wild characters and controversial music, which was intended to provoke and shock through lyrical depictions of murder, violence, and even sexual assault. The collective defended their musical decisions by claiming that the lyrics were actually satirical with the intent to confront the black male stereotype, negatively portrayed as hyper-violent or aggressive. This attention-seeking technique is not unlike what Tyler will eventually fall back on in his solo career.

Since Tyler's solo career, he has been called the "David Bowie" of today's hip-hop, as he presents all the music he creates with a particular brand, style, and a named character.[1] Beginning with his first solo mixtape, *Bastard* (2009), everything in Tyler's music is paired with a certain visual and each album's story has its own cast of characters. *Bastard* features a depressed schoolboy in conversation with a dreadful school therapist, Dr. TC. His breakout album, *Goblin* (2011) first introduced his character, Wolf Haley, who always wears a green ski mask and hates himself, communicating only with his own demons. *Wolf* (2013) continues telling Wolf's story but introduces two other characters, Sam and Salem, for a relationship triangle set place in a summer camp, where Tyler and his friends, "just wanna ride [their] bikes."[2] These first three albums resembled Tyler's production in Odd Future, and the violence was certainly not done away with, as Tyler became popular for his controversial images of violence against men and women alike, raging use of the word "fa*got" and a song that tells kids to, "burn shit, kill people, fuck school."[3] Unlike other Odd Future artists, Tyler proved that he was unafraid to take things a step further and break whatever boundaries had not yet been broken. The visuals of these albums, especially his famous music video, "Yonkers,"

1. Winston Ford and Reg, "Reg & Stone Talk Music!: Episode 64: Tyler The Creator is Hip-Hop's David Bowie," The Couch Sessions, May 23, 2019, https://shows.pippa.io/5b9d743c-d738867844a64d7c/episodes/episode-64.

2. "Slater," featuring Frank Ocean, Spotify, track 8 on Tyler, the Creator, *Wolf*, Odd Future Records, 2013.

3. "Radicals," Spotify, track 3 on Tyler, the Creator, *Goblin*, XL Recordings, 2011.

did not fall far from the Odd Future tree, as Tyler ate a cockroach (really), threw up (really) and fictionally portrayed his own suicide on camera (not really). He certainly knows how to shock people, which may have been a strategy from his youth in order to get authority figures to pay attention to him.[4] In interviews, Tyler was far more chill than his music depicts and fought back criticism with the idea that it should not be taken seriously, that it was only ever parodical or satirical, and especially had to repeat himself when he claimed not to be homophobic.[5] These first few albums carried a style largely influenced by Tyler's musical role models: Pharrell, André 3000, Kanye West, and even Eminem. Later, his musical interests expanded to artists such as Tame Impala and Stevie Wonder which had evidential influence as early as Wolf but finally begins to show in his production of *Cherry Bomb* (2015). In addition to the playful instrumentals, visuals of *Cherry Bomb* played with color, featuring hot pink and the brightest of yellows and blues. Despite being his favorite album personally, it completely flopped in the industry.

His next two releases were a turning point, and particularly his next album, *Scum Fuck Flower Boy*, was a defining moment for Tyler. First, he showed the world that he had grown up and was no longer the wild teen from Odd Future. Second, Tyler grew as a musician and was able to perfect the new style that he was transitioning into with *Cherry Bomb.* In addition to the change in musical style, Tyler's tone became more mature and sentimental in *Flower Boy*; it was also the first album in his discography without a single use of homophobic slurs. The most important thing about *Flower Boy* is that the narrative is from Tyler himself, rather than a character, which was necessary so fans would understand that the sentiment of the album was real. The promotional visuals of *Flower Boy* are sunflowers and bees, matching the garden theme of the album, which gives the listener a soothing feeling not typically expected of Tyler's music, or hip-hop in general. The record is colorful and alive, rich with jazz, soul, and R&B.

This genre-bending style was further developed in his latest

4. Something modeled years earlier by one of his role models, Eminem.

5. I only say this to lay out Tyler's response to criticism, but not to defend him. Especially since later, Tyler steps away from the harmful language and imagery, his plausible deniability can only stretch so far.



release, *Igor* (2019), his nostalgic memoir to 80's culture and also his first album to hit #1 on the Billboard charts. The album is my personal favorite, mostly because no matter how many times I listen to it, it sinks into me like I'm hearing it for the first time. Also, the 80's theme is an undeniably satisfying tie to his Bowie parallel, teasing the possibility that Tyler might be self-aware of this connection.[6] Just as Bowie dressed in character on tour to embody the things he was singing about on his record, Tyler started to perform in character as Igor, a black man with a blonde wig, gold chain, and oversized suit in a variety of bright, pastel colors.[7]

Even though these albums were very different, *Flower Boy* and *Igor* showcase Tyler opening up about his sexuality. There have been multiple times throughout his career where Tyler described himself as gay during interviews, sang lyrics about kissing boys, or posted about his fluttering crushes on other men such as Leonardo DiCaprio or Cole Sprouse.[8] However, no one knew to take these signs seriously since Tyler might have just been doing them for attention, and they were easily overshadowed by his persistently homophobic lyrics.[9] Everything took a turn when *Flower Boy*, the one album where Tyler spoke as himself, gave lyrical hints to his sexuality with more imagery of him kissing boys, and included the song "Garden Shed" about feeling trapped in "the closet" and realizing his sexuality was not "a phase."[10] Since the album was musically different and much more down-to-earth, Tyler's claims were taken seriously and warranted a deep search into his past for

6. When Tyler returned to playing characters with Igor, it became clear that Flower Boy was meant to be understood as a "time-out" record that gave Tyler the chance to be honest about his feelings. Returning to characters meant that the original, beloved techniques of his career were not done away with; that the 'old Tyler' was not lost, but simply grown up.

7. As an example, Bowie's Thin White Duke is his character for Station to Station (1976).

8. Tyler even tweeted in 2015 that he had tried to come out, but that no one believed him: "I TRIED TO COME OUT OF THE DAMN CLOSET LIKE FOUR DAYS AGO AND NO ONE CARED HAHAHHAHAHA" (@tylerthecreator, April 12, 2015).

9. djvlad, "Lord Jamar on Tyler the Creator: Is He Really Gay or Just Looking for Promo? (Part 3)," YouTube Video, 4:50, July 28, 2019, https://youtu.be/SfsZjoD2Frk.

10. "Garden Shed," Spotify, track 7 on Tyler, the Creator, *Scum Fuck Flower Boy*, Columbia Records, 2011.

other signs of him coming out.[11] Even though Tyler has still not officially "come out" in an interview, he hasn't denied it either, and if it's any confirmation, the story of Tyler's *Igor* is about the heartbreak of Igor falling in love with a man who loves a woman. Fans and critics alike were skeptical of the authenticity of Tyler's sexual revelation, which is not necessarily unjustified given Tyler's history of apparent homophobia. However, the criticisms themselves can be seen as homophobic since the accusers seemed to build their disbelief on the myth that illegitimizes gay sexuality. One writer even questioned if Tyler was cleverly, but disturbingly, "...ridiculing the gay experience for puerile effect."[12] In a way, Tyler is doing this, but possibly by positive and genuine means. Tyler is still a provocateur, but instead of eating bugs on camera and using flashy threats of violence, he wears an atypical hairstyle for black men in the form of a blonde wig, and shocks the masses by being a successful rapper who might also have feelings for men.[13]

## Hip-Hop and Masculinity Interlude

When Tyler describes his own relationship to race or gender in his childhood, he claims that his interests in music or clothes as opposed to sports made him, "too white for the black kids."[14] Tyler also mentioned that he has "feminine mannerisms," which made it difficult to navigate the expectations of black masculinity.[15] He expressed that black gender is confined, forcing men to always "act tough" and adhere to a

11. Christopher Hooton, "Tyler the Creator Has Been 'Coming out' as Gay or Bisexual for Years and No-One Cared," *The Independent*, November 23, 2018, https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/tyler-the-creator-gay-bisexual-coming-out-scum-fuck-flower-boy-lyrics-i-aint-got-time-twitter-garden-a7834751.html.

12. Benjamin Lee, "Is Tyler, The Creator coming out as a gay man or just a queer-baiting provocateur?" *The Guardian*, July 25, 2017.

13. For more on Black Masculinity and Visual Culture, see Gray (1995)

14. Dylan Green, "'These Black Kids Can Be Who They Are': On Tyler, The Creator & the Stigma of Blackness," DJBooth, February 12, 2018, https://djbooth.net/features/2017-08-04-tyler-the-creator-and-the-stigma-of-blackness.

15. Tyler Okonma, "Tyler, The Creator Breaks Down How His First Ever Runway Show Came Together," interview by Liz Raiss, The FADER, June 15, 2016, https://www.thefader.com/2016/06/15/tyler-the-creator-interview-golf-wang-made-la.



binary system of gender.[16] Despite these feelings about his upbringing, Tyler still chose to express himself through hip-hop and rap music, both of which carry their own specific relationship to black masculinity.

Rap as a genre has its roots in African rhythm and poetry, but its development is based in the history of black Americans, who used and continue to use hip-hop as a platform for expression; the genre takes back power that was and continues to be stripped away with ongoing oppression and a history of slavery. Hip-hop also has ties to black intellectuality, where the articulation of the lyrical poetry in rap demonstrated an intellectual talent that allowed Black Americans to showcase their merit after being deprived of that opportunity for so long.[17] Miles White has said that rap significantly shapes how America and the rest of the world view black people, as its popularity influences the 'White imagination' of black masculinity and culture.[18] The masculine myth that intertwines with expectations of hip-hop artists and black Americans rapidly became hyperbolized.[19] While hip-hop musicians used the music as a force against racism and socioeconomic oppression, the masculine identity had to build itself on the anti-masculine, which by construction, is the feminine.[20] Ideas of masculinity and femininity, especially as they relate to queerness, are more recently expansive and not binary. However, with

16. Jenkins (2011) poses "With all of the various ways that we can describe, label, and identify Black men, why are there only a few, limited, and stereotypical identities present in popular culture?"

17. Jenkins (2006) introduces hip hop as a space for Black intellectual inclusion.

18. Miles White, *From Jim Crow to Jay-Z: Race, Rap and the Performance of Masculinity* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 14.

19. There is a theory on black masculinity and homophobia in particular, which acknowledges the historical exclusion of blacks as "perverted" to society due to their race, and independently, the exclusion of homosexual men as "perverted." Thus, the intersection leaves little room for the visibility of black homosexual men, who risk being double-edgedly extricated from society as unforgivably "perverted," thus creating the "defensive" culture of homophobia in black communities. Seeing the deep roots of homophobia in the history of black sexual politics, it is no surprise that hip hop, which was an opportunity for black American men to proclaim a strong cultural identity, features overt homophobia as a way to distance themselves from this "perversion" and give themselves a place in society that held some social power.

20. My gender analysis will be mostly traditional in the sense that it acknowledges society's view of gender as binary and the expectations that divide gender. However, I want to preface that there are new theories on gender which I acknowledge and have the potential to dispute or complicate my argument.

roots in Freud's Implicit Inversion Theory, the male queer is typified as feminine, and so to be masculine is not only to be misogynistic, but also homophobic.[21]

The sound and image of hip-hop is almost synonymous with masculinity, which was always curious to me, because how can a genre sound masculine? Do sounds also partake in the social construction of gender? Typically, theories on gender are focused on the visual or behavioral presentation of gender. Therefore, how do we *listen* for gender? The socially constructed gendered voice that developed from the phenomenon that the majority of members of different biological sexes produce sounds that are more or less distinguishable between high and low pitches. Thus, in addition to the aggressive tone, which is tied to masculinity, hip-hop is expected to *sound* masculine because it is dominated by male artists. Additionally, Crystal Belle argued that in addition to lyrical anti-gay slurs, the greatest evidence of hip-hop's homophobia is the lack of gay representation in the rap genre.[22] Therefore, the sound of hip-hop could be considered largely misogynistic, or at the very least, hypermasculine, because of its saturation with exclusively American males, leaving little to no room for "feminine sound."[23]

Hip-hop is traditionally thought of as pushing against something. Therefore, after reviewing these characteristics of the hip-hop genre, it's no wonder why hip-hop and rap resonated with Tyler over other forms of music, especially when he was younger and brimming with angst, as demonstrated by the raging misfits theme of Odd Future. Ironically, hip-hop is very emotional when you consider that anger itself is an emotion. In Tyler's early music, even songs that were meant to be love songs were paired with the sounds of frustration, as if Tyler always had to be pushing against something—even if it meant being harsh on himself for his romantic attachments. However, post-*Flower Boy*, Tyler shows that hip-hop can be used to confront other, more vulnerable emotions, such as

21. For more on the Implicit Inversion Theory, as discussed by Kite and Deaux (1987).

22. Crystal Belle, "From Jay-Z to Dead Prez: Examining Representations of Black Masculinity in Mainstream Versus Underground Hip-Hop Music," *Journal of Black Studies* 45, no. 4 (May 2014): 287–300. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0021934714528953.

23. Donald R. McCreary, "The Male Role and Avoiding Feminity," *Sex Roles* 31, no. 9-10, 1994: 517-31. https://doi.org/10.1007/bf01544277.



loneliness or the fear of rejection.

## Before Flower Boy

Tyler's discography is closely related to his growth as an artist, musician, and human being, but a stark comparison lies between his music pre- and post-*Flower Boy*, which can be particularly seen in his most popular song, "Yonkers," and also his recent song, "A BOY IS A GUN*," where Tyler's deliberate production of each song speaks to his relationship with his own gender and sexuality. Let's begin by analyzing "Yonkers," from the 2011 album *Goblin*, where Tyler speaks as Wolf Haley. *Goblin* consists of a conversation between two voices on the album: Wolf Haley, and an anonymous, deep voice, which represents the dark personification of Wolf Haley's conscious.[24] Naming his character Wolf is likely tied to Tyler's brand, "Wolf Gang," and the name itself is hyper-masculine, evoking the image of a wolfpack.[25] The connotations of this are unclear, but clearly tied to masculinity: is Tyler the alpha wolf or the beta wolf? If we see Odd Future as his wolfpack, does he feel obligated to prove himself as the leader of the pack? Perhaps Tyler does feel that pressure. Being homophobic, misogynistic, angry, and violent are attitudes that arise when the pressure to prove ones' masculinity becomes toxic because this pressure comes with the need to assert dominance over others. These others might be women, LGBTQ+, or even other males in a fight for the alpha male role. Lyrically, there are about twelve or more instances where the imagery of violence is portrayed in "Yonkers," and some, such as the image of continuously stabbing Bruno Mars in his esophagus, are as imaginative as they are disturbing. The specificity and randomness almost makes the violence parodic, but no less uncomfortable.

Another important musical aspect of "Yonkers" that contributes to the performance of masculinity is Tyler's voice and his pronunciation of the words. While voices of higher pitch are constructed as feminine,

24. Revisiting the album's title, the voice is clearly the monstrous 'Goblin'. At the end of 'Yonkers,' Wolf describes himself as a goblin, which actually only reinforces the fact that the monstrous voice on the album is an extension of Wolf's self and mind.

25. Sometimes, Wolf Gang is spelled "GOLF Wang."

deeper-sounding voices become paired with masculinity. Thus, Tyler raps with a very deep voice, and in order to exaggerate that further, he speaks in a very "guttural" way. In addition to this manipulation of his own bodily form, his sound performance is also manipulated by bringing the microphone close to him so that the sound does not spread out into the room, but stays up-front and close. This is another tool to explain the characters in the musical performance: Wolf, alone with the thoughts that compose his conscious. In this song, we're taken inside the id of his disturbing psyche, and the lack of sound expansion means that we are not allowed to leave, no matter how uncomfortable we get. Wolf wants his thoughts to be heard, and so he imposes himself onto the listener and forces their attention in another attempt to assert his dominance. One last way Tyler uses his speech to create the aggressive tone of the song is through the hard enunciation of his consonants. He growls, whether the lyrics he raps in that instant are a curse or not. Noticing the prominence of his enunciation is interesting, because it begs you to consider what people typically do with their voices when they're outraged, but not able to yell or raise their voice to express that anger completely.

Since Tyler is very angry but cannot scream (he is alone, so what good would that do?) the listener might be deceived to feel an increase in energy as the song progresses. However, there is no "net energy" gain or loss throughout the song, as the background indistinguishably loops. Thus, the feeling of an energy increase is more the consequence of the song's increase in tension that has no place for relief. The sound waves produce a tangible density that makes the room feel heavier and more under pressure. Thematically, it makes sense that there is no space for this anger to be relieved because the song is entirely in Wolf's mind. When your mind is filled with toxicity, how could you channel that? Wolf is alone; his dialogue is with his own conscious. The song is meant to verbalize personal thoughts without too much editing, as someone might naturally do when conversing them with someone, since they can never have more empathy for you than yourself.

One really unique and underappreciated aspect of rap is how much the artist can accomplish and creatively communicate with effective orality, reducing the background music to added material. In some cases, as in this song, that's just what the background music is. I try to imagine how this song could stand alone as Tyler's vocal performance without the instrumental, which is intended to stay in its place in the background. Many people really love the beat, which surprised Tyler, as it doesn't add as much to the song as all the elements of Tyler's orality.[26] However, there is one very important thing that the beat is essential for: providing the rhythm. The relationship that Tyler establishes with the beat is conflicted, which is a characteristic of many of Tyler's earlier music and especially on other tracks of this album. Tyler chooses not to be rhythmic with the words, which I can only interpret as another way for him to establish his alpha dominance. The rhythm does not dictate how or when he speaks—only he can do that. Instead of dragging back against the beat, Wolf pulls the beat along behind him. Wolf is proving himself as the leader; he is the driver, not the passenger.



## After Flower Boy

On the more recent end of Tyler's career, "A BOY IS A GUN*" from *Igor* is paradoxically an ode to hip-hop and a gay love song. The title is fitting as the song uses the actual noises of a gun cocking and shooting bullets to complement its beat, which is a sound not unfamiliar to the hip-hop genre. Guns have their own place in hip-hop culture, with a number of songs referencing guns in their lyrics.[27] Thus, it is important that Tyler also used the sound and symbol of a gun to write "A BOY IS A GUN*" ("ABIAG"), since the paradox that it creates takes a direct shot at hip-hop's masculine stereotype. Instead of using the ideas of guns to communicate violence or to create a threat to another man, Tyler uses the imagery and familiar sounds to write a love song to another man. He recognizes that the man, like a gun, is dangerous to Tyler because of his inability to defend himself from such a weapon. Previously in hip-hop, the rapper held the gun and pointed it at his enemies, but with Tyler, the

26. Tyler humorously shared that he was actually "trying to make a shitty New York beat," giving the song its title, since Yonkers is a city in New York with a less-than-stellar reputation.

27. Consider the popular song, "Heat" by 50 Cent, or "Thug Luv," by Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, featuring 2Pac, or the list of hip-hop songs dedicated to guns compiled by Complex (2011).

gun is being pointed at him, making himself vulnerable. The song's lyrics explain that the boy is also like a gun because Tyler likes him on his side at all times: "You‘re a gun, cause / I like you on my side / At all times / Keep me safe (No, don‘t shoot me down) / Wait, wait, depending on, you know (all the time) / You could be dangerous to me (time, time) / Or anyone else." This implies another paradox, where the boy, like a gun, can make someone feel safe and yet in danger at the same time, depending on who is in control. This is a vulnerable thing to admit in relation to someone else, which makes it quite endearing: this boy doesn't allow Tyler to have control or dominance like he used to. Is that emasculating?[28]

"ABIAG" sounds more melodic than titles such as "Yonkers," and the feel of the song is a lot lighter-- so light that some songs on Igor are piercingly nostalgic for young love and novel heartbreak. The novelty of the sound, truly, is what makes the nostalgia hit home, since it takes you back to the first time someone made you feel something more, and how easy it was to lose control of yourself when that happened. In a stark contrast to the harsh consonants on "Yonkers," the rapping on "ABIAG" is melodic; the words are not as detached from one another and flow together seamlessly. When Tyler speaks, there is less of a fluctuation in energy and the words actually sound more monotone. This allows his voice to flood in and out of the instrumentals so that his voice is not always in the foreground, as in "Yonkers." This creates a different tone for the song where Tyler is no longer trying to dominate, for he is not the only person worth listening to. He allows the background instrumentals to sometimes overshadow him, as he is now humbled by his lack of control. Also, being more embedded in the song might indicate a sense that Tyler himself is a little lost in his emotions and is less confident than in the previous, more familiar version of himself.[29] Outside of the song, these emotions might describe Tyler's navigation of the new, more vulnerable identity that he is sharing.

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28. More on this from Belle, (2014): "I do agree that an unemotional persona lies at the heart of Black masculine performances. This is often an act, a performance of sorts that asserts a manhood that is dominant and deviant, attempting to define itself in a world that has often tried to deny the very existence of Black men. Thus, with regard to Black masculinity, it is difficult to decipher what is real and what is merely a performance instigated by a white gaze."

29. The music video for this song quite literally shows Igor lost, wandering about a mansion.



As Tyler lets his guard down, the production of his songs change, as does his relationship to rhythm. "ABIAG" in particular is interesting because the beat is most noticeable when accentuated or literally delivered by the sound of a gun cocking or firing. Tyler's monotone speech continues to move in relationship with the beat, like they've finally figured out how to get along. This reinforces the lack of dominance that Tyler takes over the sound production because he is not trying to argue with the beat or talk over it, as if it continues to cut him off in conversation. Instead, the smooth instrumentals and tempo comb the words out of him and help him communicate in a vulnerable and honest space. Additionally, the music feels open because of its new sound production. Tyler no longer spits into the microphone and keeps it close, which allows the sound to take up more space and travel. The sound is meant to be spread and shared; he is no longer by himself.

While new songs such as "ABIAG" reflect a growth in Tyler's emotional maturity and also comfort with his own gender and sexuality, I do not think the stark changes give any word to Tyler's authenticity. Despite the fluctuation, I think Tyler stays true to himself and his unique, weird individuality. Even though we've been able to learn more about him recently, there is still much to be uncovered, and his commitment to being paradoxical has not wavered. Coincidentally, this can even be seen in both "Yonkers" and "ABIAG." The opening line of "Yonkers" is upfront and clever: "I'm a fuckin' walkin' paradox––no, I'm not." Tyler immediately falls back on his word so that you have to pick which one to believe; he makes you work to understand him. The exact same idea is conversed at the end of "ABIAG," where Tyler turns from the original theme of the song and tells his lover, "Cause the irony is I don‘t wanna see you again / Stay the fuck away from me," which was a contrasting allusion to his *Flower Boy* love ballad, "See You Again." Tyler literally refuses to make sense or create any "truth" in his music—all we ever get is a collage of his different creations (characters included) and flashing projections of his mind. His music is always a narrative, but we can never trust the narrator.

## Conclusion

When I first read the article by a gay man who was frustrated with Tyler for coming out after years of spitting the word "fa*got," I thought that Tyler coming to be one of the leaders of the new movement within hip-hop would seem like a curse for the LGBTQ+ movement, since he is controversial, has a complicated history, and takes no shame in his provocations.[30] However, I've come to realize that Tyler's pride of his role as a "walkin' paradox," has the power to open people's minds and crush their expectations. Tyler is an attention seeker, and an effective one at that. But what we're failing to see behind the politics of his discography is someone who deliberately thinks out their presentation and performance. Since, as discussed, Tyler presents his music through the character he creates, it prevents us from ever being able to point to a single image, outfit, album cover, or song, and say "That's who Tyler, the Creator is." Because we can't do that. We can only ever say, "Meet Wolf Haley." Or "Meet Igor." The parts of these characters that resonate with Tyler, if any, will only ever be known to him.

It's not an uncommon idea that the greatest artists are difficult to understand. And while that might be a romanticization of Tyler's problematic nonsense, there's some truth to Tyler's performance always being dynamic. He has a clear and interesting relationship with the world and is suited for public attention. He can handle it; he experiments with the eyes on him at all time and warrants their reaction with his behavior. Even when Larry King pronounced Tyler as a "renaissance man," he rejected it.[31] He is no polymath, he is just a creator. He refuses to be bound to any one thing, especially labels. After understanding Tyler's absolute intolerance for being cornered into one thing—perhaps the only thing we can ever truly understand about him—it becomes clear why he is an important leader for the new conversation on gender and sexuality for black men in hip-hop. Perhaps his constant provocation is actually a

30. Lee, "Is Tyler, the Creator coming out as a gay man," 2017.

31. Larry King, "Tyler, the Creator on Gay Rappers, Profanity, and His Artistic Idiosyncrasies | SEASON 2," interview by Larry King, YouTube Video, 27:59, June 4, 2014, https://youtu.be/kC3y_9PNaoM.



stereotype on an LGBTQ icon, since he embodies every characteristic of a "diva," but exists within the hip-hop sphere.[32] One possible explanation is that if Tyler picked one image, and being queer was his brand rather than being just one part of it, then everything else would be judged through that lense. His role in hip-hop would be *the gay rapper*. But even today, no one can claim this about Tyler because he leads the internet generation in too many other ways, and this forces people to accept that being gay is just a thing that people are, and that that's okay, and that it doesn't have to change anything about a person's role in society or art if they don't want it to.

This isn't meant to overshadow the fact that Tyler's history has put him in an awkward position with some people who identify as LGBTQ+, but it does speak to the diverse journeys people can have with their sexualities. This narrative is especially important within Tyler's context as a black musician who used every ounce of his creativity to enter the world of hip-hop and fashion, and stay afloat in the face of criticism. Tyler shows that black men can be gay, play with the expectations of gender, and overall create a new black masculinity for themselves outside of the White imagination. Since, as provided by Tyler's interviews, he has always felt boxed in by the different labels by which identity is constricted, Tyler uses his power as a role model and modern cultural creator to push forward for a space in which these binary constructions are broken down so that they are not taken seriously, but only ever played around with. Even if Tyler never wants us to figure just who he is, he certainly wants to help us figure out the different people that we are, and how to be those people freely.

32. Originally brought to my attention by UCLA Graduate student Erin Fitzpatrick.

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