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### Sneaking Into the Boys Club: Gender and the Independent Record Shop

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## “Sneaking Into the Boys Club”: Gender and the Independent Record Shop

Lee Ann Fullington

The popular music industry is essentially a male-dominated world. It is unusual to find a woman in a highly regarded decision-making position. More often than not, women are in administrative and support roles—‘handmaidens’ to the male A & R staff (Negus 115). Music journalists and their readers are more often male as well (Negus 116). Mavis Bayton points out that “the lack of women guitarists in rock’s hall of fame is partly a result of the way in which women get written out of history and their contribution undervalued, but mainly a reflection of the fact that so few women get a foot on even the bottom rung of the rock career ladder” (37). In terms of the rock world, then, women are apparently more marginalized; for Bayton then comments, “women performers have been more prominent in commercial ‘pop’ and ‘folk’ than in rock” (37). Independent record shops, especially those that stock second hand vinyl, tend to reflect this male domination in rock culture. The owners of such shops are more often males, who tend to employ mostly males, and the customers are predominantly male as well, as I have found through my ethnographic research on independent record shops in Greater Manchester, UK and the Philadelphia area, USA, as well as wider via the surveys conducted over the internet. My experience as a full time member

of staff at the Princeton Record Exchange, NJ, USA also underpins my research.

Through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and surveys conducted with owners, staff, and customers, I have been investigating the culture that surrounds independent record shops. The issue of gender is a key theme emerging from my research. Women *do* own, staff, and shop in these record shops, however; as I will highlight in this paper, their experiences differ from those of the men involved. In particular, the women I talked to expressed concerns about the devaluation of women’s tastes by male staff and customers, issues of personal safety for women in a male space, accessibility of the shop and the rock world it often represents, and insecurity regarding musical knowledge.

Independent record shops are important hubs within popular music culture. Not only do they stock the recordings, but also they are also rife with information about gigs, musicians, and scene-related happenings and such. These shops are often run by an enthusiast, rather than a corporation, as is the case with HMV or Virgin (Negus 128). Thus, the stock tends to reflect

the owner's and locality's tastes, rather than the mass marketed, chart oriented music that prominently graces the shelves of the chains. Therefore, the more specialist nature of the shop will draw customers with a more specialized taste in music, and if the shop deals with second hand vinyl, it will draw the record collectors, who tend to be men, as well (Straw 4). Shopping in independent record shops may imply that the customer will have at least some specialized musical knowledge, as the shops do not tend to stock chart albums that are currently popular. Ferreting out older or collectible rock and jazz albums tends to be a male activity, according to Will Straw (10). Therefore, as the customers, owners and staff tend to be male, the independent record shop becomes a male space, and there are certain strategies these men may consciously or unconsciously employ to render the shop a 'boys club'.

Male shop owners and staff may try to assert their masculinity by devaluing music that from their viewpoint stereotypically appeals to women and gays. Kimber (owner, Stinkweeds Records, Phoenix, AZ, USA) talks of another independent shop in the Phoenix area that:

*'...is unbelievable. I mean, they will go so far as to draw moustaches on the people right on the CD. Like out in the store, if its anything like Pet Shop Boys or Dead or Alive or anything else,*

*they'll draw on them, on the CDs. How on earth do you expect to have people who are interested in it to feel comfortable enough to come up to the counter and buy it? It just blows my mind!'*

As Pet Shop Boys and various other 'pop' artists stereotypically appeal to gays and women, these men are trying to signal that this taste, and therefore these customers, do not belong in the shop (1). By devaluing this sort of music they are implicitly elevating rock as the preferred taste in the shop, reinforcing the notion that rock is men's music.

At the Record Collector (Morrisville, PA, USA) (2) the owner and a male employee enjoy needling Susan, another employee, for her love of the Carpenters, Sister Sledge, and pop and love songs from the 1970s and 1980s—'crap' in their words.

*Susan (member of staff, Record Collector, Morrisville, PA, USA): I find that they tend to play their music and it takes a lot for me to say, "Hey! Let's play something that I want to hear." They'll say, "You're not putting anything on. You're just gonna put girlie music on." And I say, "Yeah, exactly. Love songs!"*

So although Susan is into 'her' music, as it does not

fit in the acceptable male canon of music, for Sister Sledge, The Carpenters, and Neil Diamond fall well outside of it. Therefore, she is not taken seriously and she represents the stereotype of women having an inferior or less discerning taste in music to which male members of staff often subscribe. They feel they should not be subjected to hearing such music in 'their' shop.

Some female customers suggested that male staff also may use body language and facial expressions to let a woman know she is not necessarily welcome in the shop.

*Diana (record shopper, Germany): When you, as a woman, walk into a new shop where you have never been in before, the men there are looking like very unfriendly so as they would say, "Oh god, a woman—what is she doing here, couldn't she go buy clothes?" or sometimes they have a little smile on their faces like they would say, "Hey, babe. You are in the wrong store. Go buying shoes!"*

So, though this woman is a customer, the status of 'woman' supersedes the status of 'customer', for the staff members assume she must not have the knowledge required to shop in such a shop. This is much like the status of 'woman' superseding the status

of 'drummer' in bands that have female drummers (Gaar 350). Their reaction to her entering the shop is possibly a subconscious or pointed attempt to make her uncomfortable and to get her to leave the boys club to the boys.

To extend this notion of the record shop being a boys club), Les (member of staff, Kaleidoscope Records, Merseyside, UK), says of an indie record shop that it is:

*'a bloke-ist conspiracy, you know, these blokes come in poke around, ask you "What do you think of this?"...I don't want to overplay it, but I don't want to underplay it. I really think that it's a masculine thing, predominantly...most of the time its blokes talking to blokes about blokes. And most of the records we sell are not by women. Most of the records we sell are by blokes.'*

This highlights again how certain music falls outside of the collectible, male, rock canon, and how it is reflected in the stock at an independent record shop. Music by women, as well as 'pop', often don't get much space within the confines of such shops. As most music performed by women falls outside of the canon of (male) rock, the shops that cater to rock tend not to bother with music by women. This may alienate

women customers, and some male customers as well, who may be interested in or looking for this music. The triangulated relationship of male customer asking a male staff member about music made by men tends to exclude women, unless the woman is into the same music as the owner and staff of the shop.

Having highlighted just some of the many ways in which the maleness of independent record shops is constructed and maintained, I will now consider some of the strategies that women involved with these shops adopt in order to deal with this situation.

*Deena (record shopper, USA): Conversations were constantly and easily struck up between myself and others going through the [heavy] metal [racks of records]. I often initiated them, but not always. The others were always males. Invariably they were lovely, helpful, interested and I had dozens and dozens of long, involved [heavy] metal related conversation with these people...all I had to do was show I was knowledgeable and interested in metal to get treated as an equal. Of course, I dressed as they did, in a T-shirt and jeans...*

In order to be accepted in this environment, Deena knew how to fit in, by dressing in a similar way and conveying

her knowledge of the music. She found she could be treated as an equal by demonstrating her knowledge of metal, that she was a serious fan of the music.

However, more often, women may be treated as if they were not capable of knowing much about music. The stereotype of women in record shops is that they will come in with their husbands or boyfriends, often against their will, ‘huffin’ and puffin”, as Colin, (owner, Vinyl Revival, Manchester, UK) put it, and complaining that they want to leave. The men customers that come in with women will often ‘brush them off while they are looking at the records,” says Paul (owner, Static Records, Wigan, UK). Furthermore, Kimber laments:

*‘This is depressing to me, don’t think that I support this at all—but what I find is very, very few individual women come into my store and follow music...There are probably fewer than 12. I know them all. Otherwise, they come in groups with their friends and they chat and they don’t really buy anything or maybe one of them will buy something or they come in with a male and they follow him around or lean on whatever it is that he’s into.’*

Women, for the most part, are viewed by many staff and owners therefore as not as involved in buying

music at independent record shops. According to some independent record shop staff, where the boyfriend may buy collectible vinyl, she may pick up a CD. The LP is valued more than the CD for various reasons; firstly that LPs are more rare than their CD counterparts. The man is on a hunt; the woman is just along for the ride, so maybe she will buy herself something more on impulse. This and similar comments and views have cropped up numerous times in the interviews I have conducted.

Conversely, some women may try to appear unknowledgeable to play up to male sensibilities of leading the female to good music. Women, too, can of course be quite savvy and passionate about music, but may use the stereotype of being uninvolved to their advantage.

*Tiffany (record shopper, Portland, OR, USA): I am sometimes given less obnoxious treatment because our culture allows females to seem ignorant, ask for help, and ask direct questions. It's one of our rare advantages over men. I've seen a male clerk treat a guy rudely for being ignorant and asking questions, then be super-nice to me over a similarly stupid question, walking me around to the bins personally and sharing tidbits of wisdom. I sometimes think men are*

*very nice about assisting me because gallantry is at play. The downside to this is that men often assume women are stupid and ignorant, even "enlightened" men who aren't aware of their inner sexism. But mostly, it's about the individual clerks' attitude. If I asked for the new Kristen Hersh album and the clerk responded down their nose: "Are you familiar with Throwing Muses?" I might be like, "What kind of idiot do you think I am?" a different clerk asking the same question in a friendly tone of voice I'd interpret as an informed music-lover making sure I had context for my purchase.*

Thus, males within the independent record shop may be interested in helping women out in order to show off their knowledge and accrued cultural capital, as well as potentially 'picking up' the woman. Therefore, he can still assert his worth and power over her seeming inferior body of knowledge, which keeps his masculinity intact—especially if he is successful in 'chatting her up.' This potential for a date is another facet of gender in the record shop that I will not have time to go into here.

Furthermore, in this displaying of knowledge, if the woman is on the other side of the counter, she may be faced with a hostile customer who will not take her

seriously, as she, as a woman, must not know anything about such male preserves as rock, jazz, or certain strains of dance music.

*Martha (regular punk vinyl customer, Princeton Record Exchange, NJ, USA) [The male staff] were intimidating because they seemed like they knew everything and I'm thinking, "Oh, I'm gonna talk to these people and maybe they'll find out that I don't really know that much." I think that is more of a woman thing than a guy thing, that sort of, "Oh, you know maybe I'm really, I don't know this record or that record and I don't really know or collect obscure '70s bootleg things...*

*Catherine (member of staff, Record Collector, Sheffield, UK): I found a lot of male customers... [who] want to show off their knowledge and sort of say, "I know more about it than you," sort of thing. "How can you know anything about this?"*

*Philippa (partner, Piccadilly Records, Manchester, UK): It's like, especially the sort of areas of music that I do within the shop, which is drum n' bass, breakbeat, reggae, they're all quite sort of male areas. And so, you'll get a lad coming up to the counter going, "Oh, have you got this drum n' bass record?" And I process all the drum n' bass*

*so I know EXACTLY what we've got and I go "Ooh, I've not seen that one yet. I think that's out in a few weeks." And they go, "Oh, well HE knows." It's like they do that all the time. But within the shop staff, no, you don't get that at all.*

Women may have different reactions to the perceived value of knowledge in independent record shops. Martha, though quite competent, felt intimidated because she thought the men behind the counter would try to find a weakness of hers to expose, which would allow them to retain their elevated status of men being experts on music made by men. Catherine and Philippa had similar experiences as male customers tried to 'put them back in their places' as uninformed women, even if only symbolically, by deferring to a fellow man for information, as apparently there is no loss of masculinity or cultural capital if the information comes from a male. It solidifies the bond of the boys club and alienates the female member of staff from the interaction and exchange of information, therefore relegating her back to the status of 'woman' rather than 'knowledgeable member of staff' which is often bound up in the status of 'man' in the record shop.

From the opposite perspective, though, some male shop owners and members of staff are aware that in

general independent record shops may not appeal to women customers because of the stereotype that these shops are hostile bastions of music knowledge that can only be freely accessed by males. John, (owner, Buffalo Records, Santa Barbara, CA, USA) is aware of the reputation of such shops and he has set out specifically to make his shop comfortable and welcoming for ALL music fans. When I asked John about the idea of record shops as male spaces and if he felt his shop fell into that category he told me:

*...hopefully not. I mean, we tried it...from the plants that you see around here, you know, to the lamp and light in the corner, to just the colour, I think, on the walls...we try to make it no so 'macho' around here. There's a lot, a lot of our clientele is younger women, which helps, too.*

One of the members of staff at Buffalo Records, Colin, added: 'It's a real friendly environment. A lot of exchange of information goes on here, its like a course in music education!'

Within the confines of the independent record shop, we can see this world as a reflection of the gender imbalances in rock music culture. Masculinity may be conflated with knowledge about, and a specific taste in, music, and this music often excludes female

artists, which in turn excludes female and male fans of such artists. This devaluation of taste also leads to the male perception that music made by women is not worthy of a place in the indie record shop, and this reflects on the position of a woman in the record shop. Women are seen as not proactive in the indie record shop experience, either hanging onto men, or not knowledgeable enough to actually serve them properly, or women become an object of pity and possibly desire, as men may want to show women the 'right' music to listen to, and have her validate his taste by accepting his knowledge. Thus, this (conscious or unconscious) assumption by both men and women is based on the residual sexism of the music industry; that musical knowledge is something that men have, that they may decide to enlighten women with, should they show any interest, but more likely she will just continue to 'huff and puff', whether out of exasperation at being dragged into the shop, or at not being taken seriously. Like the record industry itself, the independent record shop may well be 'one of the last bastions of male chauvinism' (Negus 115) (3). However, numerous people involved behind the counter in record shops are consciously taking steps to debunk this myth of the record shop as a male preserve.

## Endnotes

1. This shop specializes in louder rock, like GBH, Megadeth, and GG Allin. However, sometimes people will trade in unwanted CDs from other genres.
2. There are two unrelated shops that I did interviews with called the Record Collector. One is in Morrisville, PA, USA and the other is in Sheffield, UK.
3. Negus, p 115, as quoted from Moss, C. 'All Men Are Created Equal—But What About The Women?' Studio. November, pp 10-13. 1990.

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