

Sisters Are Doing It For Themselves: Women Artists and Internet Self-Promotion

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The Internet has significantly changed the ways artists and audiences experience the distribution and presentation of music. The highly controversial debate over copyright and digital music piracy is so all consuming that it obscures other vital issues surrounding the relationship between music, artists, audiences and the Internet. While the battle lines over ownership are being drawn in the boardrooms of major media conglomerates, there are ever-increasing numbers of independent artists using the Internet as a primary means for the promotion and distribution of their creative ideas. This paper addresses how the Internet can be a place of empowerment for women artists, both those who choose not to participate in the corporate framework of the existing music industry and those who have been excluded by gender biases in the corporate music infrastructure. By using the technology in this manner, women musicians are challenging long-entrenched notions of women's representation in popular media and the role they play in their own representation. They are ultimately creating an environment where our very definitions of musical and professional success are subject to new questions. Furthermore, the structure of the Internet promotes connectivity and communication and

parallels historical feminist practices and attitudes in movements involving community, networking, and resource sharing. These practices, along with the desire (or necessity) to circumvent male hegemony in the music industry, ultimately challenge the corporate power structure of the music business.

In this paper, I examine aspects of image presentation and community online through the websites and music of Canadian musicians Meaghan Smith and Kristin Sweetland. Their websites demonstrate an affinity with the concepts discussed here; their comments thought provoking and enlightening. Also, I present the web presence of the women's music communities GoGirlsMusic.com and Little Red Hen; one an online resource offering practical assistance for women pursuing musical career paths, the other an artist collective providing support and networking for its members.

Feminist authors such as Sheila Whiteley, Jacqueline Warwick, and Lucy O'Brien among others have identified that historically, the popular music industry has been crafted by the somewhat antagonistic alliance of (usually) male artists with (usually) male entrepreneurs.¹ Currently the music industry is based upon a notion of patriarchal centrism. It is a hierarchical structure of male controlled media corporations that seeks to control both the production and distribution of music through a large network of people and organizations, mostly run by men.

Reebee Garofalo states that, "decentralized control over production holds out the possibility that new voices will find new avenues of expression," and furthermore that

¹ See Sheila Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2000), Jacqueline Warwick, "I Got All My Sisters With Me: Girl Culture, Girl Identity, and Girl Group Music," Ph. D. diss. (University California Los Angeles, 2002), Lucy O'Brien, *She Bop II: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul* (London: Continuum, 1995, 2002) and Rebecca Daugherty, "The Spirit of '77: Punk and the Girl Revolution" in *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture*, v. 6 (2002),

“such developments augur well for the future participation of women in the popular music enterprise.”² I submit that the rise of the Internet has created a unique opportunity for the decentralisation of *promotion* and thus further challenges power and control in the music industry. The dominant media empires, *The Economist* suggests, “[...] have been slow to embrace the Internet, which has seemed to them not an opportunity but their nemesis”; for them, contending with challenges to power and control is proving extremely difficult.³ Just as the implementation of digital music making technology has the potential to shift the control over production from professional environments to musicians with their own inexpensive home studios, the Internet can facilitate individual control over marketing and distribution, thus diminishing reliance on the corporate infrastructure. As a result, the Internet provides a framework for women artists to present their work and themselves on their own terms. Afforded the opportunity to avoid dealing directly with gender biases in the corporate music industry relating to image and the imposition of male oversight (via producers, image consultants, marketing executives, etc.), a woman artist promoting herself online is considerably freer to determine the path her career will take.

Though not a recent phenomenon, the primacy of image in popular culture is so well entrenched as to be somewhat transparent in the thoughts of most music fans; that an artist is judged as much on appearance as sound is, in the 21st-century, taken for granted.

For most musicians the image they present is almost of equal importance to the sounds

² Reebee Garofalo, ed., *Rockin' the Boat: Mass Music, Mass Movements* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1992), 11. Garofalo was commenting on the “cassette cultures” that proliferated outside the Western world that allowed for the swifter trading of ideas. Developments in portable computer audio technology have also allowed artists the option of creating their music at home; avoiding the many costs associated with studio time, hiring producers, engineers, etc. Though this is far beyond the scope of this paper, advances in recording technology must be understood to play a vital role in the decentralisation of the music industry.

³ “Music’s Brighter Future,” *The Economist*, v. 373 (October 30, 2004), 71.

they create. In the modern visually dominated climate of music videos, wall sized posters, and slick CD packaging, image and looks are all important.

For independent women artists online, the manner in which they engage with the politics of image is largely under their own control. Halifax singer/songwriter Meaghan Smith states:

I know that unfortunately image has a lot to do with how well you do in certain niches of music. I try not to focus so much on my image though. My website is not plastered with images of myself...I guess that's not really how I want to come across.⁴

Of importance here is not that Smith has made the decision to lessen the attention given her image, but rather that *the choice was hers to make*. London, Ontario, singer/guitarist Kristin Sweetland underscores aspects of independent control over her website content by stating,

I like to present myself exactly how I feel I am at any particular moment in time. There is no pretence or contrived representation, except in an artistic fashion [...] I just don't always jive with other people's representations of me.⁵

She also suggests that there is an added creative benefit to having control over her own image indicating, "I also love to have the opportunity to work with photography and graphic design in order to present myself wholly and completely from my artistic centre."⁶ Understanding that the Internet gives artists more agency in how their image is presented creates an environment where, as audience members, we begin to re-examine how we relate these images to the artist. No longer do we see the artist's image as a promotional venture directed by an industry reliant on presenting profitable imagery. Instead, we can understand the image as an extension of the artists' overall creative

⁴ Interview with author.

⁵ Interview with author.

⁶ Interview with author.

vision – in a sense, the artist and their image are more unified. Therefore, as the Internet gains traction as a promotional space, our re-examination will result in an *alteration* of the artist/image/audience relationship.

For women artists, control and independence are of vital importance in circumventing and challenging the dominance of masculinist ideology within the framework of the music industry. The ability to control her own content – the representation of herself online – changes the way she and her audience view the relationships between her image and her music. The implicit independence of an artist promoting herself online also shifts the perception of the achievements of women artists towards self-determination and away from the historical understanding of these achievements as the result of her association with male superiors.⁷

The Internet also facilitates the coming together of many independent, self-directed artists and opens up the possibilities for dialogue and the sharing of resources among these individuals. Indeed, this is perhaps the most important of the potentials created by the rise of the Internet, holding the greatest capacity for large-scale social and cultural change.

Activist and author Naomi Klein describes how the Internet has influenced modern protest movements:

[...] recent mass protests would have been impossible without the Internet, what has been overlooked is how the communication technology that facilitates these campaigns is shaping the movement in its own image. Thanks to the Net, mobilizations are able to unfold with sparse bureaucracy and minimal hierarchy; forced consensus and laboured manifestos are fading into the background, replaced instead by a culture of

⁷ See Mark Ribowsky, *He's A Rebel: The Truth About Phil Spector, Rock'n'Roll's Legendary Madman* (E.P. Dutton: New York, 1989) and Whiteley.

constant, loosely structured and sometimes compulsive information-swapping.⁸

Annabelle Sreberny suggests a similar vision of networking:

[t]he decentralized women's movement, using a variety of mediated forms, is particularly interesting articulation of the new global networking [...] there are a huge range of women's media and cultural activities on the ground, often ignored by mainstream and malestream commentary, that nevertheless are channels for women's' empowerment and thus for social developments.⁹

I believe that the Internet is similarly influencing independent music distribution.

Musicians such as the women discussed in this paper share an attraction to a technology that valorises, through its construction, social and community based activities.

In the history of decidedly feminist music movements, and indeed in the history of most social movements, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on the ideals of community and networking. These communities, as Francis Mulhern suggests are "not places, but practices of collective identification."¹⁰ The Riot Grrrl movement of the early 1990s expressed notions of community through the local (and sometimes larger) distribution networks of independently produced 'Zines.¹¹ The concept of networking is important for any musician who is attempting to make a living through their creative works. However, I believe that networking is vital for women musicians who have to contend not only with the vagaries of a system based on the subjective valuation of

⁸ Naomi Klein, "Farewell To 'The End Of History': Organization And Vision In Anti-Corporate Movements" in Leo Panitch and Colin Leys eds., *The Socialist Register: A World of Contradictions* (2002). <http://www.yorku.ca/socreg/Klein.htm>. Accessed: October 22, 2004.

⁹ Annabelle Sreberny, "Feminist Internationalism: Imaging and building global civil society" in *Electronic Empires: Global media and local resistance*. ed. Daya Kishan Thussu. (London: Arnold, 1998) 209, 213.

¹⁰ Quoted in Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd, eds. *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1989), 17.

¹¹ See Marion Leonard, "Rebel Girl, You Are The Queen of My World: Feminism, 'subculture' and grrrl power" in Sheila Whiteley, ed., *Sexing The Groove* (New York: Routledge, 1997)

creative endeavours, but also with the entrenched gender biases existing within this system.

Madalyn Sklar spearheads *GoGirlsMusic.com*, a gathering point for women musicians who want to learn about the music industry, make contacts, and share resources. Borne out of a common frustration among women musicians,¹² *GoGirlsMusic* is founded upon the ideals of communication and networking as a means to both relieve the tension experienced by women artists in a male dominated music world and gain exposure and success as a musician. Sklar describes the circumstances that led to *GoGirls*:

In 1996, I came up with the idea of starting an online women's music community after being extremely frustrated with the way I was treated at the local guitar shops in Houston, where I live. I was tired of being ignored and figured there must be others out there experiencing this, too. The Internet was new back then — it seemed like a great way to connect with other female musicians.¹³

Sklar's valorisation of connectivity and cooperation is evident in most of her public statements about *GoGirlsMusic*: "It's not just me who runs *GoGirlsMusic*," she asserts, "it's everyone. We all make it happen together."¹⁴ The website contains articles on topics vital to understanding the music business, opportunities to network with other musicians, and coaching/consultation sessions provided by Madalyn Sklar herself. These sessions, costing anywhere from \$35 for a one time half our consultation to the \$140 per month "high maintenance" plan, offer women musicians marketing strategies, motivation, press kit, and web design. Interestingly, *GoGirlsMusic* has also entered into the primary debate concerning the Internet and music sharing by promoting use of the

¹² See Mavis Bayton, *Frock Rock* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 30-31.

¹³ Julia Bloch, "DIY Queen Behind The Music" in *Curve*, v. 14, n. 5 <http://www.curvemag.com/Detailed/587.html>. Accessed: November 20, 2004.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

Weed file-sharing model, which rewards both artists and fans financially for sharing music online.¹⁵

Meaghan Smith also emphasises the value of community in successfully promoting her career as a musician, stating that, “[...] working with each other and promoting each other is the best way to go. Everyone gets ahead that way [...]”¹⁶ In addition to her own content, which includes upcoming appearances, sample audio tracks, and some pictures, Smith’s site also offers links to other musicians with whom she has worked.¹⁷ Smith’s comments echo Alexa Freeman and Valle Jones’ suggestion that “feminist communication must incorporate the notion that to communicate is to share, that it is, through whatever medium, a process by which something is exchanged [...]”¹⁸ Meaghan Smith further emphasises the importance of networking with other women artists: “it’s good to have a group of people that you’re able to play with because they’re in the same genre.”¹⁹ Smith indicates a very practical view of the use of networking, namely, that of finding similar musicians with whom she can collaborate. Furthermore, and this is important when considering the Internet as a venue for social change, Freeman

¹⁵ From the *Buzz Music* website: “The concept works specifically like this. Once the free Weed Media Activator is downloaded, Weed files are immediately available for sharing. You can play the file three times for free. After the third time, you are asked to pay for the file at a price determined by the artist. Purchasing a track allows you to play the song on up to three PCs, burn them onto a CD or transfer them to a portable device. You can also share the file with anyone you like as long as it isn’t tampered with. If the person you shared it with purchases the file, you will receive a payment as a distributor through a PayPal account. The distribution of money breaks down as follows: the artist always receives 50% of each sale; 20% goes to you as a distributor. The person who shared the file with you gets 10% and the person who shared the file with them gets 5%. Weed, like any good manager, collects 15%.” <http://www.buzzcommunicationsmusic.com/onstage/articles/article?id=22>. Accessed: November 15, 2004.

¹⁶ Interview with author.

¹⁷ <http://www.meaghansmith.com>. Accessed: November 28, 2004.

¹⁸ Alexa Freeman and Valle Jones, “Creating Feminist Communications” in *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly* (v. 3, Fall 1976), 10.

¹⁹ Interview with author.

and Jones also maintain that “this principle of mutuality demands both that [women] have access to the tools of communication and [...] actively participate in it.”²⁰

There are also websites such as *littleredhenmusic.com*, the web presence for the women’s music collective *Little Red Hen*. The site features regular updates on the members’ touring schedules and special events in addition to providing sample audio files for downloading. There seems to be no other aim of the site other than to provide information. While *Little Red Hen* does provide links to online stores or to artist websites where their members’ recordings can be purchased, the site is decidedly non-commercial. The main aim of *Little Red Hen* is to provide artists with a sense of community, from the website:

Little Red Hen is an artist collective whose itinerant ways form a partnership built upon friendship and the power of music. Together we bring our songs and stories into the heart of our community, supporting one another on the road. Wherever you are, you’re never far from a Little Red Hen.²¹

Kristin Sweetland emphasises the importance of communities like *Little Red Hen*:

As an independent musician who spends a lot of time alone on the road it is so essential to know that I have community. My sisters keep me strong. I have had the best experiences and developed incredible relationships with my dearest female musical peers. I have leaned so much and made such amazing connections both with and through networking with other women [...] these ladies have saved my life more than once.²²

As we increasingly see artists united and declaring their valuation of community and networking, our notion of how the popular music enterprise could function will begin to change. Our acceptance of a compartmentalised and centralised creative space – one which separates art and artists by genre, label affiliation, and gender – will become less

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ *Little Red Hen*. <http://www.littleredhenmusic.com/index.html>. Accessed: November 28, 2004.

²² Interview with author.

and less absolute. Music piracy represents *only one* facet of the myriad of subversive potentials afforded by the Internet. Independent women artists, simply by choosing to promote themselves online, are directly challenging and reshaping the traditional gender biases of the music industry. Drawing on a history of valuing networking and communication as a means of achieving success, women artists are exploiting the potential of the Internet and, in doing so further challenge the centralised power structure of the existing entertainment industry. Additionally, these challenges to the normative power of the industry prompt further questions as to the commoditisation of music and musicians. Artists who use the Internet as their primary promotional space blur the lines between “professional” and “amateur”. Though it is outside the scope of this paper, commoditisation of culture generally is challenged by the growth of online promotion and is an equally important aspect in re-evaluating the artist/audience relationship and the socio-economic position of artists in society.

The online world is a contested public space made so by the opportunity it provides for the widespread dissemination of content representative of differing ideologies. Yet, whether the debate is over the morality of content or the ownership or intellectual property, the Internet *remains a public space*. Study of the potential for widespread social change that the Internet provides need not be obscured by the attempts of the entertainment industry to focus the debate on the aspect of ownership; there are so many other important topics to address. The cultural space that is the Internet depends on the active participation of its users, and part of this participation must include critical examination of the Internet’s social and cultural potentials. Arguments such as the one presented here represent merely one contribution to the study of a technology, which,

though in its infancy, has already dramatically altered how we experience the world around us.

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