

# A comparison of the construction of masculinity in heavy metal and bluegrass music

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Popular music, along with every other form of culture we consume, serves to help us define our own identities. Because of the multitude of different markers we use to understand ourselves in relation to others—including gender, race, class, and sexual orientation—popular music genres are similarly varied in their construction of these markers. These constructions are determined, consciously or unconsciously, by the creators of this music based on their own experiences, and in order for their art to appeal to a specific demographic. The audience and the media also play a role in defining the stereotypical characteristics of popular music genres. In this essay I will look specifically at the genres of heavy metal and bluegrass music and the ways in which these genres construct gender, with emphasis upon the concept of instrumental virtuosity.

The typical performer of heavy metal has several characteristics in common with the average bluegrass musician. Firstly, both are male. In L. Mayne Smith's 'An introduction to bluegrass', he lists this as one of the integral markers of the style: 'Bluegrass bands are made up of from four to seven male musicians'.<sup>1</sup> Although this article was written in 1965, and is therefore somewhat outdated, it describes the traditional gender ideology that prevailed at the time, and ideologies such as this colour the development of genres, and the attitudes toward gender that develop with them. Since this article was published, there have been accounts written about the

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1 Smith, L. Mayne. 'An Introduction to Bluegrass', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 78 / 309 (July–September, 1965), p. 245.

role of women in bluegrass, notably Murphy Hicks Henry's *Pretty Good for a Girl*, which underlines the important part that women have played in the genre since its conception. Despite this fact, the general perception of the stereotypical bluegrass musician continues to favour men, a stereotype perpetuated by both the media, and the male musicians themselves.<sup>2</sup> A similar bias exists in heavy metal, with the huge majority of performers being male: 'The obstacles in the way of female metal artists have been surmounted by very few individuals'.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the quintessential heavy metal guitarist is male. Women have succeeded in making some headway as vocalists for heavy metal groups, a role which women occupy in many subgenres under the general umbrella of rock music.

As well as this predominance of male performers, the musicians in both of these genres are also generally white, and come from working class backgrounds. The beginnings of heavy metal are usually traced back to industrial centres in England, notably the city of 'Birmingham, and Ozzy Osbourne, heavy metal's most enduring performer, was the son of a steelworker and a factory worker in the same city'.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, bluegrass music is associated with the working class people of Southern America, and this is included as another integral aspect of the culture on Smith's list:

Bluegrass is hillbilly music: it is played by professional, white, Southern musicians, primarily for a Southern audience. It is stylistically based in Southern musical traditions.<sup>5</sup>

Although it is performed by 'professional' musicians, many of these bluegrass performers are required to work other, 'mainly blue-collar', jobs in order to make a living.<sup>6</sup>

Given that the artists who perform these genres of music share many common characteristics, it is unsurprising, then, that the music they play is also similar in some ways. For the purposes of this essay, the importance assigned to instrumental virtuosity in both heavy metal and bluegrass music is

2 Sawyers, June. Review of *Pretty Good for a Girl: Women in Bluegrass* in *Booklist*, 109/19/20, (June 2013), p. 14.

3 Weinstein, Deena. *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2000), p. 68.

4 Robert Walser, *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), p. 180n7.

5 Smith, 'Bluegrass', p. 245.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 253.

the most striking similarity between them. However, before this concept is explored with reference to popular music, we must first examine its historical context, and how it has been integral to the construction of masculinity in music since its conception.

Robert Walser addresses this topic effectively in his study of heavy metal, tracing the concept of virtuosity back to fifteenth century Italy:

"'Virtù' designated a type of individual excellence; as used by Machiavelli, it can denote "talented will," ingenuity, skill, efficacy, strength, power, or virtue. As applied to art, it reflected the relationship of art to power, as larger-than-life images and performances celebrated the wealth of power of an elite.'<sup>7</sup>

He also mentions the gendered connotations of virtuosity, in that it is linked to power, freedom, and potency, all of which are characteristics generally associated with masculinity in Western patriarchal society. An elucidating example of historical attitudes towards instrumental proficiency can be seen in reports of piano performances in Paris during the nineteenth century. At this time, there was an increase in the number of female pianists giving concerts and participating in competitions in the city. Whereas the language used to describe performances by such virtuoso composer-performers as Liszt and Thalberg 'commonly dwelt on the element of conquest', this vocabulary was not used in relation to female musicians, possibly on account of their performance of stereotypically feminine repertory, but also undoubtedly due to their general status as women.<sup>8</sup>

The concept of virtuosity, specifically instrumental virtuosity, can be observed in both heavy metal and bluegrass as masculine-coded. It manifests itself in much the same manner in both genres: through solo passages on a lead string instrument—electric guitar in the case of heavy metal, generally the banjo in bluegrass—which demonstrate the extreme technical proficiency of the musician. 'Virtually every heavy metal song features at least one

7 Walser, *Running With the Devil*, p. 75.

8 Ellis, Katherine. 'Female pianists and their male critics in nineteenth-century Paris', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 50/2/3 (Summer–Autumn, 1997), p. 356.

guitar solo',<sup>9</sup> and most bluegrass pieces involve solo sections as well.<sup>10</sup>

The guitar solo is of paramount importance in the genre of heavy metal. As well as playing an integral role in the musical structure of the songs, it is also essential to the construction of masculinity in this kind of music. Virtuosity is equated with control, as it was in nineteenth-century Paris; control of the audience by the performer, barely maintained self-control among the listeners themselves, and control over the music by the composer.<sup>11</sup>

Outstanding performances are described as creating 'a sense of perfect freedom and omnipotence', thus ascribing power to the musicians who deliver them.<sup>12</sup> As well as the general concept of technical prowess being associated with masculinity, the guitar itself is also overwhelmingly associated with masculinity; of all the great guitarists mentioned by Walser in his discussion of virtuoso playing, none are women. Therefore, the potency ascribed to the virtuoso is inevitably categorised as masculine, as it has been throughout history. Thus the guitar solo is used to construct an idea of masculinity linked inextricably with control and power.

A similar situation prevails in the realm of bluegrass music. In particular, virtuosity and the instrumental solo are seen as duelling grounds in the battle for masculinity. This sense of competition in bluegrass music is addressed by Bill Hardwig in an article in which he compares the musical and nonmusical activities of Bill Monroe, whose band were among the first bluegrass performers, therefore setting the precedent for the construction of masculinity in the genre.<sup>13</sup> Monroe participated in several traditionally masculine sports, including baseball and cock-fighting, around which he constructed a conventional male identity. This masculinity translated into musical terms through his virtuoso solo playing, and Hardwig asserts that this was a calculated choice on the part of musicians such as Monroe:

In this light, I believe that we can attribute the appreciation of male competition in bluegrass music to the concern of the performers to script

9 Walser, *Running With the Devil*, p. 50.

10 Smith, 'Bluegrass', p. 250.

11 Ellis, 'Female pianists', p. 357.

12 Walser, *Running With the Devil*, p. 53.

13 Bill Hardwig, 'Cocks, balls, bats, and banjos: Masculinity and competition in the bluegrass music of Bill Monroe', *The Southern Quarterly*, 39/4 (June, 2001), pp. 35–48.

carefully their self-images, focusing on how they will be perceived by the public.<sup>14</sup>

Thus bluegrass performers use the instrumental solo to construct a specific ideal of what it means to be a man while at the same time fulfilling the demands of this ideal by asserting their dominance over another man, thereby confirming their own masculinity through a show of power, in a similar manner to heavy metal guitarists.

In addition to the concept of virtuosity, the use of an instrument is an important part of the masculinity constructed through the heavy metal or bluegrass solo. Historically, men have been associated with technology and culture in all its forms, with women being seen as more connected to nature.<sup>15</sup> This is especially relevant to the electric guitar, as it is more noticeably a piece of machinery than an acoustic instrument. Strohm argues that:

'while female acoustic guitarists have long been accepted and frontwomen in rock bands have become commonplace, women electric guitarists have struggled to overcome prejudice derived from the macho image of the electric guitar.'<sup>16</sup>

Whereas from the sixteenth century onward, the guitar was consistently associated with women in domestic situations, this ideology changed with the electrification of the instrument in the twentieth century:

Electrifying the instrument was a decisive step in making the guitar a symbol for masculinity.<sup>17</sup>

In general, instrumental virtuosity has remained the domain of men, with the majority of renowned female performers being vocalists, a

14 Ibid., pp. 36–37.

15 Sherry B. Ortner, "Is female to male as nature is to culture?" in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (eds.) (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 68–87.

16 Strohm, John. 'Women guitarists: Gender issues in alternative rock', in *The Electric Guitar: A History of an American Icon*, André Millard (ed.) (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), p. 183.

17 Millard, André and McSwain, Rebecca. 'The guitar hero', in *The Electric Guitar*, Millard (ed.), p. 157.

tradition that stretches back to the concerto delle donne of Ferrara.<sup>18</sup> The conflation of the instrument with the phallus also plays a role in the masculinisation of the electric guitar, an idea carried over to heavy metal from rock music.<sup>19</sup>

As well as being related to masculinity, the sense of power derived by and ascribed to performers from a virtuoso performance in the context of these genres has to do with intersections of race and class. White, working class men—who make up the majority of heavy metal and bluegrass performers—often feel disenfranchised due to the conflict between the privileges that they feel should accompany their status as white men, and the inability to access these privileges which comes with the oppression of their economic circumstances. Add to this the fact that ‘in bluegrass music idealized masculine values are fraught with insecurities’,<sup>20</sup> and that ‘metal fans tend mostly to be young because much of metal deals with experiences of powerlessness’,<sup>21</sup> and it becomes clear that the sense of control and power accessible to musicians, and thereby to their audiences, through extreme technical prowess may serve to alleviate these anxieties.

Aside from these musical factors that contribute to the construction of masculinity in bluegrass and heavy metal, the appearance of the performers is also an essential factor. Whereas there are notable similarities in the musical styles of the two genres, however, the mode of presentation of the music is highly differentiated. Whereas heavy metal performers routinely dress ostentatiously, especially those in ‘glam’ bands such as Poison and Mötley Crüe, bluegrass musicians present a much more traditional and conservative image of masculinity. These stylistic choices amount to two different strategies in dealing with the ‘threat’ of the feminine. In the former, male musicians take on some of the superficial aspects of femininity, for example:

‘garish makeup, jewelry, [...] stereotypically sexy clothes, including

18 Taruskin, Richard. *The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 80.

19 Frith, Simon and McRobbie, Angela. ‘Rock and Sexuality’ in *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (eds.) (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 371-389.

20 Hardwig, ‘Masculinity and competition’, p. 36.

21 Walser, *Running With the Devil*, p. 110.

fishnet stockings and scarves, and [...] long, elaborate, “feminine” hairstyles.’<sup>22</sup>

This use of androgyny removes some of the sexual power that women are thought to hold over men—personified in the stereotypical image of the femme fatale which can be seen in many heavy metal music videos—thereby lessening the threat of women.<sup>23</sup> Bluegrass musicians, on the other hand, seek more traditional methods of maintaining their patriarchal power over women, reinforcing their masculinity by wearing conventional male-coded clothing such as suits, in stark contrast to the studded leather, fishnet tights, and dramatic makeup of some heavy metal performers. These performers prefer to seek comfort in established gender roles, rather than exploring the possibilities of appropriating feminine modes of expression.

In conclusion, the construction of gender in bluegrass and heavy metal music, as in all genres, involves both musical and nonmusical elements. The technical prowess of virtuoso instrumentalists in both genres serves to represent the power and control associated with masculinity in all areas of patriarchal society, while performers use various dress codes in order to reaffirm their superior masculine status, a status which is maintained only through the domination of men over women.

22 Walser., p. 124.

23 Ibid., p. 118.

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# The Morality of the Miniskirt

Isabelle Duff

For many historians hailing from a generation of second wave feminism, the study of fashion is considered trite and is often dismissed. However, fashion provides us with a scope for study in all aspects of women's lives. It is clear from the oral history work undertaken by Catriona Clear and through the contemporary press that clothing and appearance were of significant importance to the majority of women.<sup>24</sup> In order to gain a full and balanced view of Irish society in the 1960s it would be wrong to eliminate studies on women's appearance. It is possible to gain a perspective on the matters of most importance to women from the problem pages of magazines, it also indicates how people spent their money and what people wore to an event gives an indication of the importance of the event to the attendee. Clear correctly asserts that the neglect of study in women's appearance in the past is a serious neglect among historians of the study of women's culture.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the standards of women's dress and debates on the issue also give an indication of concerns of morality in the period discussed. This will be addressed through a study of the miniskirt, easily the most controversial trend of the decade. This essay will attempt to prove that the debate over miniskirts reflected the debate on the changing role of women in Irish society, and the standards Irish women were expected to aspire to. Many of the discussions around the miniskirt challenged established beliefs on female sexuality and the standards of domesticity placed on Irish wives and mothers, especially in regard to young women. Evidence for this argument is primarily sourced from the national and regional press, but it is reinforced by academic articles and media contemporary to the period.

During the 1960s, young women were recognised as a growing and im-

24 Clear, Caitriona. 'The Minimum Rights of Every Woman?' Women's changing appearance in Ireland 1940–1966, in *Irish Economic and Social History*, Vol.35, (2008), p. 69. Clear argues that fashion was of considerable significance to the interviewees as many discussed fashion with enthusiasm without any prompt.

25 Ibid.