

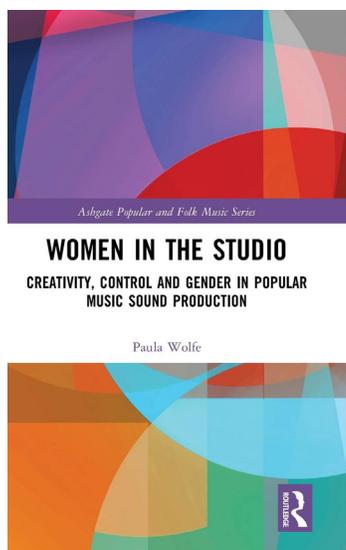
Women in the Studio. Creativity, Control and Gender in Popular Music Sound Production, by Paula Wolfe

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DOING JUSTICE TO WOMEN PRODUCERS



Reducing gender imbalance and inequalities remains the biggest challenge of the early 21st century popular music industry. Paula Wolfe offers a rare empirical contribution on this cultural production paradigm that has lately become a hot topic in academia. Her perspective on what may be perceived as a controversy draws upon an in-depth analysis of the demographics and gender-related speech content at music industry conferences, trade shows, and training events in the UK in 2006–2018. To enhance this analysis, she carried out two interview-based studies in the same period that highlight the work practices of 30 women professionals of the European popular music industry. Unavoidably, her triangulation of

methods converges to provide evidence of systemic gendering and gender discrimination in the industry.

In the introduction (pp. 1–26) of *Women in the Studio*, Wolfe mentions that at first, recruiting women for her studies from the general unions and institutions was unfruitful because of the low number of women who succeed through the common career paths in the field. In the first chapter (“The music industry and gender,” pp. 27–55), we learn that women hold only 6% of the senior music business positions

in London. Regarding audio production, a recent *Annenberg* study reveals that women represent only 2% of the credited producers on the 600 songs of the 2012–2017 *Billboard Hot 100* end-of-year charts, and 0% of the Grammy’s “Producer of the year” nominees in 2013–2018.¹ Moreover, only two out of the 652 credited producers on these 600 songs are women from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. These harsh numbers underline the relevance of Wolfe’s efforts to convey the life experience of women producers who persist in the field despite the gender barriers and “glass ceiling.”

Women in the Studio provides the reader with an exhaustive and up-to-date review of the popular music and gender literature, with a focus on the use of studio technology. Wolfe’s work supplements the growing body of the music production literature that has yet kept feminist visions silenced. I have thus opted for the style of feminist writers to review this book, which implies building on the author’s arguments with some personal thoughts instead of summarizing her ideas and criticizing her achievements.

COLLECTIVE EMPOWERMENT TO PREVENT THE SPREAD OF PATRIARCHY

According to the main thesis of *Women in the Studio*, digital audio technology enables women to thrive in music production by maintaining control of their sound in their home studio, at least until they gather enough self-confidence to face the unwelcoming gender climate of the commercial recording studio. Wolfe demonstrates this thesis in the third chapter (“Self-production, music technology and gender,” pp. 93–123), which is based on the positive experiences of 14 women who used the intimacy of their own facilities to express their inner voice on their own terms for their solo singer-songwriter projects, as opposed to complying with the paternalism and conformism of major labels. In the fourth chapter (“New industry and gender,” pp. 124–150), the author quotes artist-producer-label Nerina Pallo who testifies that an independent artist also has better control over who represents them in the media. Unfortunately, confinement in a home studio appears to be the most realistic solution for women singer-songwriters towards developing their skills and promoting their work before exposing themselves and their artistry to the patriarchal structure of the popular music industry.

I draw a parallel between this solitary solution and the COVID-19 pandemic situation that has forced most producers to rely on their home-based digital audio technology while enjoying the possibility of managing their production schedule around childcare and other domestic necessities. Wolfe is transparent in her study report about the fact that her participants were mostly white and middle-class. She explains that producers need self-determination to pursue a music career, and that “self-determination is not just a question of will, but is linked to secure circumstances and qualities such

1 See Stacy L. Smith, Marc Choueiti and Katherine Pieper (2019), “Inclusion in the Recording Studio? Gender and Race/Ethnicity of Artists, Songwriters & Producers across 600 Popular Songs from 2012-2018,” *Annenberg Inclusion Initiative*, <http://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/aii-inclusion-recording-studio-2019.pdf> (accessed 17 July 2020).

as personal drive, determination and self-belief” (p. 45). In this view, the COVID-19 situation highlights how well-established, or culturally privileged and economically secure one needs to be in order to pursue a music career from home, regardless of gender.

In the fifth chapter (“Media representation and gender,” pp. 151–179), the importance of individual self-determination is reinforced in a table that provides strategies for overcoming the consequences of systemic gendering in music production (Table 5.1, p. 165). I propose to add collective empowerment as an effective strategy to challenge the status quo, and as an alternative to self-isolation for young women who aim to develop skills in music production. To illustrate my proposal, I refer to the female London-based punk band The Slits who confronted the rules and conventions of the industry in the late seventies from the genuineness of their studio production process to the subversion of their mediated image.² Technophobe or unwilling to learn how to use studio technology (that was analog at the time), they successfully found (male) producers and engineers who respected their artistic vision without parenting them—however the band rejected one (male) manager after the other. After The Slits, each of the four founding members pursued her artistic vision and life path. My purpose is not to deny their individual passion and self-determination, I just point to how their collective strength allowed them to cut through and to cope with the extreme sexist aggressions that they had to face while succeeding in avoiding the patriarchal pitfalls of the industry. I thus suggest that collaborating with people who embrace a feminist approach of creation can counter the most perverse adverse effect of patriarchy for women, namely female competition.

IMPROVISATION PROCESSES TO REDUCE TOXIC SOUND CONTROL

At the end of the second chapter (“Music production and gender,” pp. 56–92), Wolfe quotes writer-producer Isabella Summers about the main and genderless producer task of “catching a vibe”, in the sense of “capturing the emotion portrayed through an artist’s performance” (p. 84). Wolfe claims that positioning the music producer as the individual author of this capture within a patriarchal framework excludes women producers. In this view, some women producers reported feeling more comfortable when being credited as co-producers. This case is complex because regardless of gender, music producers tend not to be properly acknowledged for their accomplishments.³ For instance, reducing the producer’s job to sound manipulations makes their “vibe-catching” skills invisible. A producer does not request a composition credit when their artistic vision impacts on the song, nor do they get a performer credit when they coach a singer and edit the best takes together. In contrast,

² See Viv Albertine (2014), *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes. Music, Music, Music. Boys, Boys, Boys: A Memoir*, New York, Thomas Dunne Books St Martin’s Press.

³ See Grace Brooks *et al.* (2021), “Do We Really Want To Keep The Gate Threshold That High?,” *JAES*, vol. 69, n° 4 (April 2021), pp. 238–260, <http://www.aes.org/e-lib/browse.cfm?elib=21032> (accessed 13 April 2021).

some composers and performers do not hesitate to credit themselves as the producer or a co-producer because they have provided feedback on the actual producer's work. I thus suppose that the unwillingness of some producers "to let go of them" (p. 65) comes from their fear of their artistic accomplishments to be denied if they loosen their control. If my supposition is true, then toxic masculinity in sound control could be attenuated by fully acknowledging the producer's contribution.

In an interview-based study,⁴ six renowned music producers working for different genres agreed that the highest level of producer's artistic involvement, i.e. "collaborating with the artists," leads to the best artistic result but requires a great deal of "emotional labour"⁵ to cope with artists' sensitivities. By comparison, a managerial producer position that may slip into an authoritarian or paternalistic behaviour is less exhausting. Ideally, the interaction between producers and artists would follow "art of collaboration" principles,⁶ e.g. the abolishment of the hierarchies among instrumentalists that was introduced by African American jazz performers in the late fifties and in the sixties "to free" jazz from its white cultural appropriation.⁷ For instance, a jazz saxophonist expects the drummer they hire to play what they are hearing internally instead of sticking to the beat for "improvised compositions" to unfold.⁸ Similarly, a singer-songwriter could expect the producer they hire to design the sound that they are hearing internally instead of applying technical recipes for the "produced compositions" to unfold. However, taking the risk of combining the inner voices of all creative parties requires everyone to abandon their attachment to their own "sound signature," another construct of the star system of the industry. For this model to function, professionalism, maturity and awareness would be more useful than "thick skins" (p. 67) on both sides of the studio glass window.

CATCHING THE VIBE OF FEMALE VOICES FROM "THE FEMALE GAZE"

Two interesting paradoxes emerge toward the end of the book. Through the example of producer Isobel Campbell who broke the rules by using a male vocalist to perform her music, Wolfe emphasizes that the display of the female voice is what causes women songwriters to be sexually objectified and stereotyped. At the same

4 See Amandine Pras, Caroline Cance and Catherine Guastavino (2013), "Record Producers' Best Practices For Artistic Direction—From Light Coaching To Deeper Collaboration With Musicians," *Journal of New Music Research*, vol. 42, n° 4, pp. 381–395, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09298215.2013.848903> (accessed 17 July 2020).

5 See Allan Watson and Jenna Ward (2013), "Creating the Right 'Vibe.' Emotional Labour and Musical Performance in the Recording Studio," *Environment and Planning A*, vol. 45, n° 12, pp. 2904–2918, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1068/a45619> (accessed 17 July 2020).

6 See Guerino Mazzola and Paul B. Cherlin (2009), *Flow, Gesture, and Spaces in Free Jazz. Towards a Theory of Collaboration*, Berlin, Springer Science & Business Media.

7 See Philippe Carles and Jean-Louis Comolli (2015), *Free Jazz/Black Power*, translated from French by Patricia De Millo, Jackson, ms, University Press of Mississippi.

8 See Amandine Pras (2015), "Irréductibles défenseurs de la composition improvisée à New York," *Études critiques en improvisation*, vol. 10, n° 2, <https://www.criticalimprov.com/index.php/csieci/article/view/3341> (accessed 17 July 2020).

time, singing is the role that gives women the highest chance to reach visibility in music. The other paradox is the fact that the industry has difficulties taking women artist-producers seriously because they are multitasking. Ironically, it is a common belief that women are much better than men at multitasking. We can also think of famous women such as artist-producer and film director Laurie Anderson who have comfortably transcended the art world boundaries that have been defined by men.

As Wolfe mentions, producing electronic music is the perfect refuge for women who wish to avoid “voice objectification” and “role misunderstanding.” Indeed: “With electronics you can strip away any humanity or gender. It’s not about turning female into male gender but actually turning female into non-gender” (Nik Void in Awbi 2014, cited p. 166). Reading this quote reminded me of the conclusion reached by Boden Sandstrom in her ethnography of women live engineers in the USA in the eighties: “As women mix engineers in a predominantly male environment, we experienced the breakdown of gender identities. We were often viewed as genderless.”⁹ Unfortunately, it seems that this situation has not much changed in 40 years.

In summary, as women producers, we have to self-isolate to learn our skills, stop singing to avoid gendered representation, hide that we can multitask to be perceived as experts, and distance ourselves from our womanhood to survive working in a studio without being sexually objectified, stereotyped, silenced, or marginalized. What is the remedy to protect our inner power and creativity throughout all these sacrifices?

When I was on unemployment [benefit] I was not ashamed of being a social outcast. Just furious. It’s the same thing for being a woman: I am not remotely ashamed of not being a hot sexy number but I am livid that—as a girl who doesn’t attract men—I am constantly made to feel as if I shouldn’t even be around.¹⁰

I agree with Paul Thompson who stated in his endorsement that *Women in the Studio* is “essential for anyone working, playing or practicing within the music industry.” Indeed, this book draws “the problem with women producers” out. Given the hopeless gender disparity in our industry, I would like to encourage composers, performers, producers, audio engineers, label staff, and music critics to find some inspirations from feminist books and “female gaze”¹¹ film productions to overcome the patriarchal establishment of our field, e.g. *I Love Dick*¹² that mocks white masculine supremacy in American modern art. If white-male-dominated fields like American cinema and TV productions left the door ajar for alternatives, we should also be able to move on in music production.

9 Boden Sandstrom (2000), “Women Mix Engineers and the Power of Sound,” in Pirkko Moisala and Beverley Diamond (eds.), *Music and Gender*, Urbana, IL, University of Illinois Press, p. 300-301.

10 Virginie Despentes (2010), *King Kong Theory*, translated from French by Stéphanie Benson, New York, The Feminist Press At The City University of New York.

11 See Iris Brey (2020), *Le regard féminin. Une révolution à l’écran*, Paris, Éditions de l’Olivier.

12 Chris Kraus (1997), *I Love Dick*, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e); Joey Soloway and Sarah Gubbins (dir.) (2016-2017), *I Love Dick*, TV Series, Amazon Video.

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