

# Gender Inequality in the Rock & Pop Music Industry: Breaking the Glass Ceiling

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With my involvement in the music industry over the past years, I have discovered that stereotypes and prejudices are present within the business. Those most often victimized by the music industry are women. Countless studies have taken place that address women's objectification in music videos and the demeaning nature of lyrical content. In addition, the concept of a "groupie" has been discussed through multiple media outlets such as books, music, television and movies. Groupies even span other forms of entertainment such as professional sports. What has not been as widely documented is women's involvement in the music industry. In entertainment and in the real life settings, men are primarily shown as the heads of large music corporations and record labels. Up until recently, a woman's presence in a large corporation meant she was either a wife or secretary. When a woman is present at a rock concert specifically, certain assumptions are made. Unfortunately, many of these are negative assumptions are reinforced through behavior that aligns with these stereotypes. Because of media reinforcement as well as actual occurrences, these stereotypes continue to exist, thus limiting women's mobility to work within the music industry.

## **The Problem**

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The music industry is one of the only industries where it is socially acceptable to discriminate against females. Bands have the option to decide that they do not want a female to take on tour with them as an instrument tech, merchandise sales person, or tour manager. Job postings are

often specified based on gender and age. Reasons given by bands to discriminate against females are often based on bad experiences with some females, and general stereotypes about female and their involvement in rock music.

Because of the unique nature of the music industry, many key roles within the business are small businesses under larger corporations, as well as freelancers and independent contractors.

Frequently, the statistical data that large companies have are not readily available in the industry thus making it more difficult to identify the disparities between females and males. While the lower-level positions are hard to identify, among senior-level executive positions at major labels only 4% are women.

## **The Hegemonic View**

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Because rock musicians are generally male, females being backstage or working in tour settings are often questioned based solely on their gender. While not always being the reasons, the common assumptions and prejudices of females backstage are commonly attributed to one of the following things:

### **Groupies**

One of the biggest factors to swaying perception about females backstage at concerts is the dominant hegemonic ideas towards females in society brought forth in part by the media. The inclusion of groupies in movies and other forms of media has continuously altered the gaze of society to perceive that all females who appear backstage as groupies.

Groupies are the focus of the 2000 movie, *Almost Famous*. Through the media, these girls have been categorized into one look and mentality. As with the character of Penny Lane and other non-fictional groupies, groupies are often slim, white females attractive to a male heterosexual gaze. They are often scantily clad and may appear unintelligent. Quite often, they are younger than they tell those around them. The girls insist that they are friends with the band and inspiring the band—serving as their muse. The widely held viewpoint is that groupies are not concerned with the music but only the name of the conquests. Aside from moral issues some associate with groupies, this is one of the biggest criticisms of this lifestyle.

## **Girlfriends**

Another reason why a woman would be backstage is that she is actually dating or married to a member of the band. While infidelity on both ends is often involved, these girls are held to a higher esteem than groupies are. These girls normally complain of being referred to as groupies, and are often forced to deal with fans and females attempting to proposition their significant others.

Girlfriends often end up with jobs such as selling merchandise or tour managing because they are essentially in the right place in the right time. Deciding to put girlfriends in such a position often leads to disputes within the band and within the relationship. In addition it is perceived that the girlfriend really is not in control, but her male partner is because the hegemonic attitudes towards heterosexual relationships places men as the breadwinner and responsible for most business transactions.

## **Nepotism**

Nepotism is normally the assumption when a female is not attractive to the hegemonic heterosexual male. Those working in higher positions on record labels and music related businesses tend to be upper-middle class white males. As a courtesy to their daughters, they allow them to work on tours at a young age and are given titles that would generally be allotted to those 10 years older than them.

These generally young white females are allowed to go on tour, but are often subjected to the watch of many members of the touring crew (if her father is not also on the tour), who report the actions of the girl to her father.

## **How Women & Media Are Perpetuating These Views**

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When performing a simple Google Search of the word “groupie” links such as “Tales from a Groupie,” “Groupiedirt.com” and “Boston Groupie Love” appear on the first page of the search results. Females who brag of their conquests run many of these sites. In addition to sites documenting the exploits of groupies, there are sites that describe how to become a groupie. In these guides the writers stress that “looking hot” is the most important part, and as a side note may mention that some musicians like interesting or funny girls, but it is best if they “Be sociable and interested in what they have to say” (eHow, 2010). This directly aligns with the idea of women being passive and being seen not heard. “Frequently women are mocked as silent, stupid, and inconsequential, (Caputi, 2003).” Similar to Killbourne’s Killing Us Softly 3, the worth of a female is based entirely on her physical appearance, thus dehumanizing the females.

These pro-groupie websites, in addition to magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, and TV shows such as *Sex in the City* enable young girls to adopt this lifestyle. It fills the “gap between girlhood and marriage” (Ouelette, 2003). This behavior is excused through euphemisms such as with Penny Lane in *Almost Famous* being referred to as a “band-aid” or “muse” not a groupie.

The lifestyle is stylized to appear glamorous and exciting through movies, music and television. Books such as *Confessions of a Video Vixen* and *I'm with the Band* tell stories of celebrity encounters, lavish trips, free drinks, and unlimited access. In addition, shows like *Rock of Love* and *Flavor of Love* show the possibility of celebrity status by becoming a groupie; again these media forms set out to glorify the behavior, yet ridicule them all the same. While several women are after one man, one man is “dating” up to two dozen girls at one time, yet the females are made to look crazy. The idea of the hysterical women helps dismiss any claims made by females as unreasonable or absurd.

While in the end of *Almost Famous*, Penny Lane goes through a traumatic experience with overdosing on prescription medication, the scene plays out in a way in which she is made to look foolish and as if it was entirely her fault. William being the voice of reason has to shift blame from Penny to the members of the band. In addition, even though throughout the movie, Penny was in a dominate position over William, in the end it is still the responsibility of the male to “save” her both figuratively and literally.

Girlfriends, groupies and fans alike are not usually after the wealth of a musician, “female sexual desire [is] linked to upward mobility through men” (Ouelette, 2003). The only way these women think they will be able to succeed in life is through the acknowledgment and acceptance of men.

Another step in my “how to” guides involved gaining access to the industry in some other way. Women will find alternative ways to gain access to bands by being photographers or journalists. In an old article from Time Magazine, a journalist describes an individual groupie: “the undisputed queen of the class at the moment is a young Manhattanite whose carefully acquired talent as a photographer has gained her entree to several top rock bands” (Time Magazine, 1969).

## **Effects of these Assumptions on Women in the Industry**

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Because these stereotypes exist and continue to be perpetuated females attempting to be involved in the music industry are perceived as groupies. Because people have ulterior motives as photographers and journalists, those trying to further or start their career in these professions must prove themselves continuously.

“Young girls are pawned off on roadies, given STDs and drugs, slapped around, and ignored completely when a better piece of ass comes around. Some are even interchangeable by their own admission” (Maerz, 2007). Immediate negative effects can occur to women not attempting to make it in the industry. Because of the glamorization, many of the risk factors that are present within promiscuous behavior are overlooked because the musicians are held to the esteem of gods frequently.

While the scope of this paper does not let me interview individuals from my experiences as a journalist, I have dealt with rude tour managers and bands members who have ignored or belittled me because I am female. Contrary to that, there have been times where sexual advances and pick up lines have been used. Regularly, interviews are done on tour buses, or in back lounges. While I have never encountered this issue personally, I know that harassment of female

journalist can occur in these more intimate settings. In addition, concertgoers also make assumptions when a female is seen emerging from one of these areas.

Instead of being treated as a victim when situations like this arise, females are often criticized for their behavior. Instead of blame being placed on the offenders, these situations serve as unfounded reasons as to why females are not hired or brought on tour. Essentially, it is said that the easiest way to avoid these occurrences is to tour without females.

## **Disparity Between Men & Women**

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Throughout *Almost Famous*, Penny is made to be a hegemonic stereotypical blonde female. She is bubbly and carefree, only breaking this persona around those she trusts most dearly. When Russell, one of the bands' lead singer in *Almost Famous* experiments with drugs, while it does cause turmoil within the band, he is not in danger of dying (like Penny was). His rude outbursts and behavior is excused, while Penny's justified emotions are dismissed. Even when countless hours are spent with the band, she is still referred to as "that groupie," within discussions. She is never able to gain the respect from the band until an outside male figure, William, steps in to legitimize her.

An article on factoidz.com titled "Why Groupies Are Destroying The (Indie) Music Business" goes into great detail about how their existence causes disorder in families, harms the reputation of bands, and countless other accusations; however, again no fault is ever bestowed on the males. (Pauwels, 2010).

Women who want to be taken "seriously" in the music industry must present themselves in a professional manner at all times. Any attempts to let their guard down leads to criticism from

several sources. Everything a female does on tour is scrutinized much more closely than males. Part of this professionalism rests in attire. Outside of offices and even in concert settings skirts, low cut tops, boots, etc are so closely tied with the stereotypical view of a groupie that females wearing this clothing are judge negatively even if their behavior does not reflect any promiscuous tendencies. Men in the industry almost never have to worry about attire. While in an office setting professionalism matters to both genders; however, in a tour setting while males often consume alcohol, and have sexual encounters, I have heard about many females who have been kicked off tours for attempting any of these behaviors.

Questions such as “What are you doing backstage?” or “How did you get that job?” are almost solely reserved for females, and any of the prior answers delivers certain connotations, often negative. While males are almost never questioned when backstage, the assumed answer is always that they are in the band, or working on the tour. People assume that they have worked hard to end up at whatever level they currently are without the help of parents, or other “un-fair advantages.” “Hegemony is... a method for gaining and maintaining power,” (Lull, 2003) and these assumptions all but guarantee that men in power stay in power.

### **Complicating assumptions: the Counter-Hegemonic View**

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Positive and negative actions have and are currently taking place to counter the hegemonic view of stereotypes in the music industry. While very rarely discuss, male groupies do exist. “Pleather, a 32-year-old straight guy who offers... memories of Courtney Love” (Maerz, 2007). While the moral and ethical implications of promiscuity are still in question, it does shift the gaze momentarily to the behavior of the man, as opposed to the hegemonic tendency to focus on the female’s actions.



Obviously there are women in the music industry that have managed to circumvent the groupie label and establish themselves as high figures in the industry, those doing their part to counteract some of the negative stereotypes. In *Almost Famous*, the female copy-editor at *Rolling Stone* serves as an example; however, one can also notice her complete lack of sexual appeal. This could be perceived as the male director's gaze claiming it is not possible to be attractive and professional. In addition, in her role she exemplifies masculine qualities, which could be the justification for her high title in the company.

Female musicians can often avoid the label of "groupie," though they are usually still questioned backstage and simply because they are female. In opposition to that, musicians such as Yoko Ono and Courtney Love have often be deemed groupies because of the astronomic levels of fame their husbands achieved prior to their deaths, and some say the females were using their husbands. Female musicians are usually only seen as singers in bands, but when in other instrument roles they are often assessed and compared to males in their field, again forced to prove themselves more than a male in their same situation would have to.

It is common for those working in a particular field to date others in their field because they understand the stresses of work, share the same hours, as well as other conveniences. While some companies frown upon (or completely restrict) inter-office relationships, this still often occurs. Problems arise in the music industry due to this commonality. Even though a female may constantly be surrounded by male musicians, and other males that work within the industry, if a female that has legitimized herself in the industry decides to date a musician, she is viewed in a negative light. While the women may have been able to avoid the "groupie" label, this action could revert her back to the standard hegemonic viewpoints.

## Conclusion

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The media perpetuates a stereotype that actively exists in rock music culture. Even in movies about one of the most liberal and progressive professions, entertainment and rock music, still feel the need to “punish” the promiscuous female character. In combination with the females choice to continuously present themselves as groupies (or label others as such), those trying to make a legitimate impact in the music industry must contest against these females. Without the media these stereotypes and perceptions would still exist, but would be less identifiable amongst mainstream culture. These assumptions will continue to cause problems for many females attempting to work in the industry until double standards and generalizations are demolished.

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