Essay: Music History

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Music is enhanced by history and very much rooted in its surrounding cultures. To discuss how this impacts our understanding of music history, we must first define what history is before we attach this to music. So, what is history? There are many ways in which this question could be answered, but in its most basic sense, history is simply the past. It is the nature of humanity to arrange history in chronological order, this need for order derives from a desire to make sense of the past. The same is true of the history of music. In ordering the past, we start to categorise music by its characteristics, composer and date; but we fail to see the flaw in our thinking. Of course, Beethoven's sonatas were still being performed during the twentieth century, and they are still performed alongside popular culture today. In turn, we see that history is naturally arbitrary – it is not systematic. A key consideration that we must be aware of is the lens in which we are viewing history. It is the social and cultural context of music, whether this be gender, race, or any other social issues, that shapes our understanding of music history.

Traditionally, the music industry has always been dominated by men. As far back as the medieval period, there are few women composers who are considered relevant to the history of music, perhaps this is because of the gender stereotypes that were present in society at the time. Marcia J. Citron describes these stereotypes in two spheres, the 'public sphere', which houses professions such as medicine, education and the arts, and the 'non-public, or domesticated sphere', in which the focus is on women in their roles as mothers and housekeepers – a concept that derives from the First World War, in which women were expected to manage home life whilst the men were at war (Citron, M.J. 1993). These spheres are equally relevant when we consider how our understanding music history is shaped. Since music resides in the 'public sphere' it is naturally monopolised by men, and in turn a chain reaction develops – if the greater proportion of musicians are men, then those writing about this music are predominately men. Of course, reading about the past is the only way that we can understand history, this history is narrated through a male gaze – the same male gaze that dominates a large proportion of the music industry today. Music critic Ann Powers, exemplifies this point in her article, enunciating that 'in popular culture…the pseudo-generic man still rules', (Powers, A. 2016). It is evident that gender has developed prejudices that marginalise women from the music industry with 'over two-thirds of the music acts performing in the UK [being] male only' – a rather disturbing figure when we consider the diversity of genres available to us today.

The divisions in the realm gender become increasingly clear when we consider the Rockism versus Poptimism paradigm that 'originated in the mid 1960s' (Moore, A. 2002). It outlines the expectation that rock music 'works with conventions of masculinity and femininity that situate … males as active participants, females as passive consumers', (Frith, S. 2007). Perhaps one of the less obvious reasons for this is that the male dominated society of rock music is critiqued by a predominantly male audience; in the 1960s, it was these male critics that formed the boundaries dictating which artists were worthy of a place in the "popular music canon". Bands such as The Beatles, The Rolling Stones and Guns 'n' Roses set the template for what a rock band should be now, and for the future, and in doing so, women were segregated and made largely redundant in the rock industry. Janis Joplin was one of the first female artists to blur the gender boundaries. Joplin was not deemed aesthetically beautiful enough to be a successful female star in the popular music scene; in a bid to find her place in the industry, she turned to drugs and sex and was often referred to as being 'one of the guys'. Joplin was a victim of the gender stereotypes of the rock industry, and eventually, 'sexism killed her' (Raphael, A. 2004), but she was an inspiration to women and female artists such as Tina Turner and Stevie Nicks started to appear in rock. Today, rock music is still predominantly dominated by men, but Joplin's influence gave birth to a societal move which gave women the breakthrough they deserved and gaining them a place in the music industry.

The emergence of Poptimism saw women take centre stage in the industry. With artists such as Dua Lipa and Taylor Swift topping US and UK charts, women are dominating the pop scene. Ann Powers states that 'women in music have always been associated with pop – with prettiness' (Perry, C. 2011, in an interview with Ann Powers). Personally, I agree with Powers; the pop industry has morphed into a highly sexualised genre. With advancements in technology, music videos have become part of what makes a song so popular. Niki Minaj is a prime example of the impact of music videos on success. Over time, Minaj's aesthetic has changed, when she first came into the music industry, she was well known for her vocal abilities and her quirky sense of fashion; but as we trace her career we see that the focus has shifted from her talent to her body. Minaj emphasised this in her music video for 'Anaconda', in which she sexualised her body, proving that having the ideal pop/rockstar image is essential for success in the competitive music industry. Of course, Minaj is only one example, and she is certainly not the first. It is important to note that in many cases, artists will shape their own image, however, in other cases, record companies and producers discriminate against individuals in order to sell.

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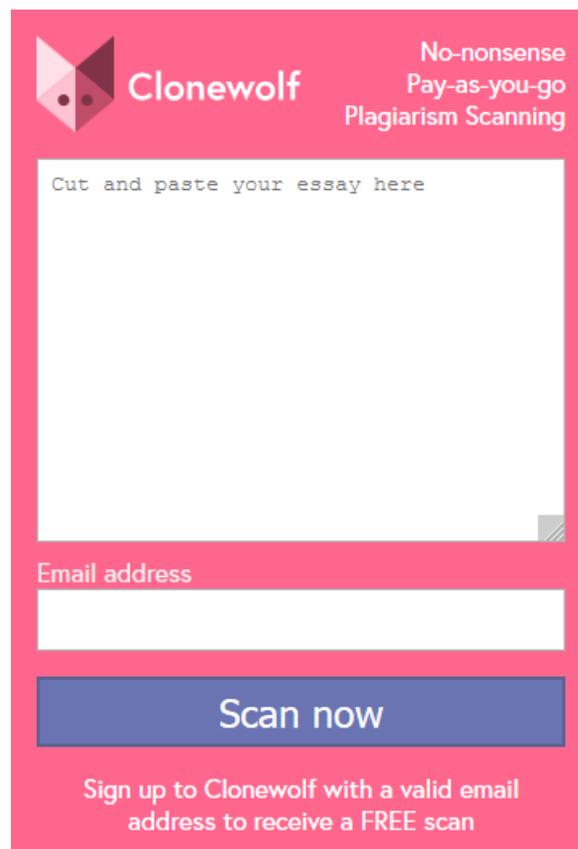
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