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WOMEN AND THE ELECTRIC GUITAR

Mavis Bayton

Where are all the great female electric guitarists? Why haven't we had an Erica Clapton, Pat Townsend or Jenny Hendrix? Ask the average person to think of some famous women guitarists and they will be hard pushed to come up with a single name. In June 1996 *Mojó Magazine* (Issue 31) celebrated 'The 100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time'. Only three of them were women: Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Joni Mitchell and Bonnie Raitt. The lack of women guitarists in rock's hall of fame is partly a result of the way in which women get written out of history and their contribution undervalued, but mainly a reflection of the fact that so very few women get a foot on even the bottom rung of the rock career ladder. So the key question is: why do so few women set out on the career of electric guitarist?

Looking at popular music as a whole, women have been music consumers rather than music producers: the main role for women is that of fan. Women performers have been more prominent in commercial 'pop' and 'folk' than in 'rock', but their place in all these worlds has been predominantly that of vocalist rather than instrumentalist. Where women have been instrumentalists they have tended to be keyboard-players. Whilst women folk singer-songwriters have played the acoustic guitar, the electric guitar (surely the instrument which most epitomises 'rock') has been left in the hands of the boys.

There have always been women vocalists. So, for example, in the early 1960s there were, in America, a large number of all-female singing groups. The 'British Invasion' of beat music, however, signalled the end for these vocal groups. It is hard to think of any women's beat groups. This female absence is all the more surprising in that many of these beat groups, and most notably the Beatles themselves, performed quite a lot of covers of American all-girl singing groups. Why were young women not themselves performing this eminently suitable material in the new beat group format? The answer, I believe, is simple: all-girl vocal groups suddenly looked passé. The Beatles had changed the mould: it was no longer

enough just to sing, you had to play your own instruments too and, above all, that meant the electric guitar. At that time, although many girls took up the acoustic guitar (in the footsteps of Joan Baez and Joni Mitchell), the idea of playing the electric guitar was alien to them. The arrival of the electric guitar, then, led to the exclusion of women from groups for some considerable time.

In the decades since, there have been more women playing electric instruments and, indeed, all-women rock bands, but it is still the case that men are the norm and women the exception. A head-count of UK musicians in local and national bands will highlight the continuing gender imbalance. In a typical small city or large town in the UK, there will be hundreds of men playing electric guitars in local bands and hundreds more playing by themselves at home. In contrast, you will find around a dozen women playing electric guitars in bands. I have recently carried out a head-count in Oxford and I estimate the proportion of women instrumentalists in local bands to be somewhere between 2 and 4 per cent. The trade magazines reflect this relative absence. They also reinforce it, for any novice or would-be female guitarist is still confronted with a solidly masculinist world.

In 1988, 1992 and 1996, as part of my ongoing research into women's popular music-making, I analysed the trade magazines for guitarists. In each year, the overwhelming majority of the photos, features and news were of male guitarists: women's presence has been absolutely minimal. Here I shall just discuss the summer of 1996. Taking the August issue of *Guitar*, there were eighty pictures of male guitarists. In contrast, there were only two of women playing guitars and one of these seemed to be stereotyping female insecurity, by showing a scantily-clad and worried looking female under the sentence 'Don't Drop That Guitar' (an advert for guitar security straps)! The back cover of the August issue of *Guitar* School magazine shows musical equipment and a sexy woman clearly positioned for the male guitarist to have sex with. In *Total Guitar* there was a handful of pictures of women but they were without exception holding acoustic instruments. The only sizeable picture of a woman was located over the advertising line 'The best players play the best pickups': the scantily dressed woman is not positioned as musician but as groupie. On the other hand, compared to 1988, I did notice that there is an absence of blatantly phallic and naively macho 'cock rock' advertisements, such as 'Make it Big with an Aphex Aural Exciter' or 'Mega-Muscle', although there were still plenty of naked hairy chests and medallions in evidence!

In terms of text, all but one magazine in the batch I purchased had no main feature articles on female musicians. The exception was *Guitar* School

magazine, which had one feature article on Sinéad Lohan, whilst the other six articles were on men. This article was, however, somewhat questioning her playing abilities. The title was 'I Can Play, Really' and asks, 'Who says a woman's place is in the kitchen?' The (male) author later comments, 'As a "girl with a guitar", one might expect Sinéad to opt for a dainty acoustic, but no, her current instrument is a black Godin Acousticaster.' Has he not heard of Chrissie Hynde, Bonnie Raitt or L7? Last, these magazines typically contained transcriptions of pieces for purchasers to learn to play. These were all written by men. Likewise, all the technical advice pages and playing advice were by men. All the covers depicted male guitarists. Two magazines came with free CDs, predictably, of male players.

How can one explain the lack of female electric guitarists? At the turn of the 1980s, when I was playing guitar in an all-women band, the question intrigued me to the extent that I embarked on a sociological research project. This research involved participant and non-participant observation and in-depth interviewing of a cross-section of female rock musicians in the mid-1980s. In 1995-6 I updated my research. In total, I have interviewed around a hundred women musicians. The points I make here are based on that research.¹

I start from the supposition that there are no physical reasons for the lack of female guitarists. Women are just as musical as men, and at any age they can acquire the strength and skills required to play any instrument in any style of popular music. Women are just as capable of becoming rock musicians as men are. Lead guitarists are made, not born. The reasons for women's absence are entirely social.

As girls grow up, they learn (from family, school, books, magazines and, above all, their friends) how to be 'feminine' and not to engage in 'masculine' activities. Playing the flute, violin and piano is traditionally 'feminine', playing electric guitar is 'masculine'.² On TV and in magazines, young women are presented with repeated images of men playing electric guitar; there are few female role models to inspire them. Thus most young women do not wish to become rock guitarists, and, even if they did, would not believe it to be possible. The very first steps in learning the electric guitar force a young woman to break with one of the norms of traditional 'femininity': long, manicured, polished fingernails must be cut down.

Yolande (bassist with Marcella Detroit): I have taught a little bit in youth clubs. . . . I have had girls saying 'I don't want to cut my nails'. I've had other women saying they don't like the idea of getting muscles.

It is difficult to stay 'feminine' in a rock band precisely because 'femininity' is an artifice: it is assumed that women do not sweat, that their noses do not go red and shiny, and that their hair stays in place. Or, in the words of Judith Butler (1990): 'gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts'. Those 'acts' involve 'work' which is antithetical to the 'work' involved in playing electric guitar in a band. Moreover, if gender is 'tenuously constituted', then playing electric guitar jeopardises its maintenance.

Terri (guitarist in 1980s jazz rock band: You find you have to keep up your feminine 'girly' thing and that doesn't particularly go with being in a hard, slobby job, which is what music's all about.

In contrast, for young men playing guitar in a band directly enhances their masculinity. (I have known more than one male guitarist who proudly preserved the bloodstains on his fretboard.)

That minority of girls who are not discouraged from playing the electric guitar by its traditionally masculine connotations face a series of further obstacles. Compared to boys, teenage women lack money, time, space, transport and access to equipment. They are pressurised (by commercial teen culture and their schoolfriends) to get a boyfriend. The search for romance can devour their time, better preparing them for the role of fan than for that of musician and, even in this role, young women behave differently from young men. Male fans identify with their guitar-heroes and seek to emulate them by learning to play themselves. In contrast, female fans fantasise about sex, love, marriage and babies with their idols (Vermorel and Vermorel, 1985). Male fans buy a guitar; female fans buy a poster.

If, against the odds, the desire to play electric guitar persists, a girl has to contend with another major obstacle: boys. Unlike classical guitar, there are few formal settings in which to learn to play rock. Thus the informal friendship groups within which rock music-making occurs are of crucial importance as learning environments. However, teenage women are not often welcomed in male music-making cliques and thus do not generally get the insider information and tips which are routinely traded within them. Male musicians tend to be possessive about such technical information.

The vast majority of bands are male and many actively exclude women. A major preoccupation of young men is establishing their 'masculinity'. Thus, so-called masculine traits are exaggerated. It is in their younger teens

that most male rock guitarists start playing in bands. To have, say, a girl on lead guitar would undermine rock's latent function of conferring 'masculine' identity on its male participants. Its 'masculinity' is only preserved by the exclusion of girls. I think that if it were traditional for girls to play electric guitar, then boys would avoid it just as much as they currently avoid embroidery. Girls fulfil the role of 'outsiders'/'negative reference group'/'the Other'. So, from the boys' point of view, girls must be kept out of rock bands just as they are kept out of cricket and football. A number of the women I interviewed told me of their early experiences. Enid, for instance, who was a heavy metal guitarist during the early 1980s:

Enid: At that time, the guys we knew who could play didn't want to know at all about us. Females playing in a band, at that time, was totally unheard of. They thought, 'Oh, girls! They won't be serious and they won't carry on. And they wouldn't be any good anyway.'

Guitar shops are also 'male' terrain: they rarely employ women as assistants, and the customers are overwhelmingly male. Thus boys tend to feel at home there. In any of these shops you can observe the assertive way in which young men try out the equipment, playing the beginning of a few well-know songs time and again, loudly and confidently, even though those few bars may encompass the sum total of their musical knowledge. In contrast, nearly every one of my interviewees said that guitar shops felt like alien territory. For instance:

Amy (16-year-old guitarist in 1990s Oxfordshire band, Frances Belle): At Russell Acott I feel very intimidated. Especially going to ask - they're all stood behind the counter, these massive metal blokes. Well, that's what they look like, judging by their image. I go up and go, 'Can I have a top E string?' because I don't know the proper names or anything, so it's even worse. And they go, 'What gauge? What sort?' And I'm like, 'I don't know'. So I don't like going in and looking at guitars or anything in music shops. . . . When you're trying, they're just staring at you. If you don't know much as well - and then they pick it up and go (imitates complicated guitar playing) and you're going, 'Oh no, I'll just take that!'

Novice guitarists, like Amy, reported that trying out the equipment was akin to being on trial; they were scared of showing themselves up and

being 'put down' by the assistants or laughed at, whilst experienced players relayed tales of condescension or of simply being ignored. If a woman guitarist goes into a shop with a man, the assistants tend to talk to the man not the woman, even if the man is not actually a guitarist.

Fran (bass guitarist in various 1990s Nottingham bands including Sub Rosa, Mothers of the Future and The Very Good Rock and Roll Band): You go in and all the blokes are sitting in one corner talking about some riff that they came up with last night, totally ignoring you. They are very patronising. They see that you're a woman and they think, 'How did you dare come in our music shop?'

Rock is associated with technology, which is itself strongly categorised as 'masculine'. 'Femininity' involves a socially manufactured physical, mechanical and technical helplessness, whilst 'masculinity' involves a display of technical competence. In marked contrast to girls, boys get given technical toys and become confident about technical things. Women are often alienated from the essential technical aspects of rock. If they become singers, or play the sax, they may manage to avoid full immersion in this sea of technicality, but not if they play the guitar. Thus young women may be drawn towards the electric guitar but are put off by the multitude of electronic and electrical components, which are a basic requirement for a rock performance: leads, plugs, amplifiers, plug-boards, etc. They lack confidence. Some women who had been playing in rock bands for years said that they still had not completely overcome this problem of 'technophobia'. For instance:

Vi Subversa (guitarist in 1980s punk band, Poison Girls): I think there is a tendency for us still to be scared of equipment: the 'black-box-with-chrome-knobs' syndrome. . . . I've obviously become very familiar with what I do but I still don't feel physically as at one with my equipment as I think most men do. . . . It took me a year before I turned my volume up. Roger would see that my amp was turned up even if I turned it down, because I was still scared of it. . . . of making a noise to that extent. I turned the knobs down on my guitar for a whole year. And then, suddenly, I thought, 'Fuck it! I'm not going to do that anymore.'

Moreover, technical language is often used as a power strategy in a mystifying way in order to exclude women. This can happen informally

amongst groups of male musicians, by sound crews at gigs, by technicians in recording studios and so on. So it is not only that women lack confidence, they are also deliberately excluded from this technical world.

There are, then, a number of factors which can help to explain why so few women play the electric guitar, but I believe the major reason is that the electric guitar, unlike the acoustic guitar, is seen as 'male'. The skills involved in playing the instrument are perceived as 'male' skills, inappropriate for women. A woman playing a rock instrument is breaking the gender code.³ She faces a set of low expectations concerning her competence (woman with guitar = fish with bicycle). For a man, a good performance on the electric guitar is simultaneously a good 'performance of 'masculinity'. The 'heavier' the rock the more true that is. When you go to a metal concert, it's the men in the audience who play 'air guitar', not the women. In doing so, they are affirming the male bond between themselves and the musicians up on the stage. The electric guitar, as situated within the masculinist discourse of rock, is virtually seen as an extension of the male body. This is always implicit and sometimes explicit, as when men mime masturbating their 'axes'. Heavy metal guitarists unashamedly hold their guitars like a penis. Prince even has a substance being 'ejaculated' from his guitar! (Male) musical skills become synonymous with (male) sexual skills. With legs firmly planted akimbo, the guitarist is able to lean back in a parody of sexual ecstasy. Metal fans may argue that this whole bodily stance is knowing, ironic and fun. That may be so. The fact remains, however, that it is an exclusively 'masculine' idiom.

It is not only the shape which is symbolic, but also the sheer volume and attack of the instrument which connotes phallic power. 'Power, the essential inherent and delineated meaning of heavy metal, is culturally coded as a masculine trait' (Weinstein, 1991). Advertisers in guitar magazines choose words with care to endow their gadgets with masculinity: 'strong', 'overpowering', 'punchy', 'tough', 'cut-throat' and so on. And in both language and image, sexual innuendo abounds.

All of this causes problems for the woman guitarist, in terms of how she holds and plays her instrument. Rock guitarists (unlike classical and jazz players) typically hold their instrument low down in front of their genitals, radically adapting their fingering style to suit. Yet most players actually find it easier to hold their guitar on their chest or at their waist. The main reason given, by men and women, for playing the guitar at pelvic level (or lower) is that it 'just looks right'. I would argue that the only reason for this is the silent encoded phallicentric message. If you play it higher up it is seen as less 'masculine'. A woman with an electric guitar

looks 'wrong' anyway and if she then plays it at chest height she looks even more 'wrong'. Thus, if a woman wants to look 'good' she has to play in a 'masculine' way. For instance:

Sara (guitarist in 1990s Sheffield rock band Treacle): When I record I have it really short, up here. Because it's easier to play. But when I'm on stage, obviously, I have it - not really low down like a big heavy rocker - but in the middle, so it doesn't look stupid up round my boobs.

Feminists have had particular objections to the traditional mode of playing. For example,

Alison (bass guitarist in 1980s jazz rock band): Women don't often seem to play guitars and basses so low down. . . . I don't think it's true that women can't do it. I think there are very few women who would choose to do it, feminist or not, actually. . . . I think a lot of women find using your guitar like that very obnoxious or objectionable, and if you're feminist it's that much worse, because you can see that much more in it.

Heavenly is a band not noted for its worries about being 'girly' and so it was particularly ironic that Amelia told me she was worried about playing the guitar too high:

Amelia (guitarist in 1990s indie band Heavenly): I would say that if I had been a better feminist I would have been more determined to hold it correctly. I don't hold it well. . . . I used to play quite high and it was considered very sissy. So I now wear it probably lower than I should do! It is an issue, definitely! Pete's always trying to get me to wear it higher, because he says I play it better when it's higher. But I refuse to do it 'cause I look too silly!

Most female guitarists I spoke to (whether in the 1980s or the 1990s) had considered these problems if not actually agonised over them.

Claire (guitarist in 1990s indie band Sidi Bou Said): If you wear your guitar too low you are incapable of moving anywhere and because I play lots of bar chord and stuff up the neck it's easier to have the guitar higher. But I feel a bit 'poncey' with the guitar too

high. . . . I do like the idea of women playing guitars slung like men. . . . I've always thought guitars are really sexy and really strong things and I like the fact they're slung where they are. I couldn't play it up here; it wouldn't feel right. It's all about sex, really.

Debbie even risked her health by playing her guitar very low:

Debbie [from 1990s pop band Echobelly]: I started getting RSI [repetitive strain injury]. It's really bad. So my guitar started getting higher and higher. But it's really bad. I get a huge swelling up here from fretting.

The problem is partly one of a lack of female role models. Although a musician might not be consciously copying anyone, there is no doubt that she is unconsciously influenced by other (male) guitarists and absorbs masculinist performance norms. The middle-aged punk performer Vi Subversa developed an ironic solution to this problem, subverting the meaning of stereotypical macho guitar hero movements:

Vi Subversa: I know when I go in for some big chords that this is what men do. And my feeling when I do it is irony, because I know that you don't have to strut around to make a good sound. I know that you can do it anyway. For boys to see a woman doing it is feeding them an image they haven't had before.

And in Vi Subversa's case not only are the boys seeing a woman playing 'power-chords' but an older woman at that.

If playing styles raise issues concerning the female body, so does the instrument itself. Technical objects are political in their design. The electric guitar was designed for men, by men, and it has thereby functioned to exclude women. These days, guitars can be made in various shapes. Why, then, does the standard rock guitar remain decidedly phallic? I believe that if it was mainly women who played electric guitar the shape of the instrument would have changed by now; not only for symbolic reasons but also because of the female body. Perhaps guitars would typically be held above the waist and their design make allowances for the fact that women have breasts. If you hold your guitar at chest level you risk crushing them and this is particularly painful if you are pre-menstrual. Both Juliet and Kate from Oxford's 1990s band, Twist, for instance, mentioned this problem. Kate used to play a Gibson 5, which is a big-bodied guitar,

and her breasts hung over the top in a manner which sometimes embarrassed her. I used to play a Gibson Les Paul and, whilst my left breast used to get squashed, my right breast used to fit snugly into the top curve in the guitar's waisted middle. I was not the only one to attempt this partial solution. For instance,

Anna (guitarist in Sub Rosa): They've got that kind of slot at the top which you can hook your tit over the top of. You can either squash it against your stomach, which is going to hurt, or you can hook it over the appropriate bit . . . I'm going to work on a funk rhythm guitar with a concave back that you fit your tits into!

Despite all the physical and symbolic obstacles strewn in the path of would-be female electric guitarists, a small minority do set out on a musical career.⁴ My research shows that they then face further problems which men do not; the entrenched sexism of the rock world. They encounter hostile male musicians, prejudiced promoters, patronising disc jockeys, obstructive technicians who sneer and make sexist jokes at their expense, inhospitable masculinist working conditions, unimaginative marketing by record companies, and exploitative media coverage. They also face harassment and put-downs because they are women.

The most common form of harassment is verbal abuse of the 'show us your tits' variety. This sort of abuse reflects the fact that women's place on stage is only legitimate if they take their clothes off. At gigs in the 1970s you could sense some men's incredulity: if you were not going to expose your breasts, then what were you doing up on stage? A woman is as likely to be evaluated on the size of her breasts as on her guitar playing. Moreover, such comments are meant to be heard by the performers. It can be startling and off-putting for the novice guitarist to have to deal with demands that she strip.

This kind of harassment is still as common in the 1990s as it was in the 1970s. To many of my interviewees, such abuse was so routine and taken for granted that it barely required a comment. Practically every woman musician that I interviewed had experienced it.

Terri (of 1980s jazz rock band): There's always either a comment or some uneasy atmosphere or something. Every gig there'll be some little something that has to be dealt with. [But] a lot of women just have that experience happen to them so much of the time that they block it out. And it's the victim syndrome. It's like almost that you draw that kind of attention to yourself, that

somehow women are responsible for those things. Or, 'Oh, it's not serious, dear. It doesn't matter.' We're so used to being harassed.

But younger women today have been strongly retaliating. Actively drawing the audience's attention to the perpetrator and confronting him usually works. My interviewees supplied me with a number of amusing and effective one-line retorts which they had used. Male hostility also often makes women musicians determined to show how good they are, although there is usually an accompanying resentment.

Sometimes harassment goes further than verbal insults, to become physically threatening. My interviewees recounted particularly scary stories of gigs abroad. For instance:

Sharen (guitarist in Ms45): I remember once when I was 18. I was doing a gig in Colorado. Some guy actually came up to the stage and picked me up and started to carry me off . . . it was scary! I hit him on the head with my guitar and a big fight started.

Emma (of Lush): We just did a tour of America and we walked off the stage at one gig. Because there are these weird radio festivals and people are just moshing and punching each other senseless. And people were just throwing things at us. Not like 'Get off the stage'; it was just a sport for them at these festivals. . . . It was a really violent atmosphere. . . . I was afraid when this massive shoe came hurtling towards my head. That's when I walked off.

So sexist prejudice and active harassment act as a handicap for the female guitarist. But the most general problem is simply not being taken seriously. The status 'woman' seems to obscure that of 'musician'. Female guitarists are expected to be sexy and incompetent and these expectations form a hurdle which must be coped with or combated in some way. Guitarists told me about men at gigs who, after admiring their instrument, played very fast up and down the neck to show how good they were and to put the woman down. Even when a woman's performance is appreciated it is not always her instrumental skills that she is complimented on:

Sara (of Treacle): After the gig, people come up to you and, instead of saying, 'I really liked what you did', they'll say, 'I like your hair.' Like, when has a male musician ever got 'You've got

nice eyes' instead of They'd never say that to a male person!

Furthermore, even when the comments seem to be about a woman's musicianship they may mean something different:

Anna (of Sub Rosa): The times I've gone on stage and been wearing miniskirts or looking fairly girly, I've got more compliments on my playing than if I had been wearing jeans and a T-shirt. I've got a friend who says, 'Them right dead-legs who come up to you after gigs and go, "I thought your playing was really good", what they actually mean is, "I fancy you in a skirt".'

Finally, there is another very basic reason why female guitarists do not reach the celestial heights. Unlike men, women have to carefully juggle the demands of family and career, personal and public life. Women are typically unable to commit themselves to rock careers in the wholehearted way in which men do precisely because of these commitments elsewhere. The centrality of family and love relationships make it difficult for girls to make long-term plans. In a sense, all career plans are provisional. In contrast, for a boy having a girlfriend is not the be-all-and-end-all of his life and marriage does not interrupt his career. For a man, paid work is the central plank of his life. Apart from the minority of highly successful musicians, most women still have to choose between a rock career and motherhood. Male guitarists typically have their career serviced by the hidden labour of girlfriends and wives. Female guitarists are far less likely to get such support. Where were Erica Clapton and Pat Townsend? Washing the dishes and feeding the baby, probably.

I look forward to the day when there will be as many women playing electric guitar in bands as men. I look forward to this not merely because I want to see an end to sexist constraints on women, but also because of the effects this would have on musical performance itself. In playing styles, men would no longer be the yardstick against which women are measured. If as many women played guitar as men, particularly lead guitar, then the instrument would no longer be seen as a phallic symbol and this would also be reflected in its design. Playing rock would no longer denote masculinity. In a non-sexist world half of all electric guitarists would be women and gender would be no more relevant to playing than eye colour or height is today. I choose to end with a quote from the inveterate middle-aged guitarist Vi Subversa:

All of technology is dominated by men . . . but I'm fucked if I'm going to say it belongs to them. It's ours! Right? Every single wire that's been put together was made by a man who was fed, nurtured, supported by women somewhere. I think we've got to reclaim the lot.

NOTES

- 1 The 1980s research led to an unpublished doctoral thesis: Mavis Bayton (1989) 'How Women Become Rock Musicians', Warwick University. The updated research has been for a book being published in the near future by Oxford University Press.
- 2 In many parts of the world musical instruments are sexually classified and in some tribal societies the consequences of breaking a musical taboo can be serious. But exactly which instrument each sex is allowed to play varies cross-culturally.
- 3 I do not have space in this article to discuss clothes, but women in feminine 'drag' (satin slips, nighties, wedding dresses) 'kicking shit' out of their guitars, women like Courtney Love and Babes in Toyland, and indie women with the ironic and contradictory ballgowns-plus-Doc Martens approach, are creating exactly the sort of 'gender trouble' which Judith Butler (1990) proposes as subversive political action, upsetting the notion of a fixed, true or real gender and revealing gender to be, in itself, a fabricated performance.
- 4 The women who do play electric guitar are exceptional in that they have overcome the obstacles which I have been discussing. Two main routes into playing have been feminism and punk. Both of these opened up a playing space for women. It is no accident that there was an increase in women musicians in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

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