

GENDER AGENDAS: RESEARCHING WOMAN MUSICIANS IN HAMILTON, AOTEAROA/NEW ZEALAND

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‘What factors enable or disable women’s participation in original popular music performance in Hamilton?’ This research project was an ethnographic study that drew on interviews with musicians, and participant observation in a local live original music scene and as a teacher at Wintec (Waikato Institute of Technology)’s Bachelor of Commercial Music course, in Hamilton, Aotearoa/New Zealand. The purpose of this article is not primarily to reveal the results of this research, which have been published elsewhere (www.genders.org), rather it reflects on how the researcher’s subject position, choice of methodology and theory can reveal and perhaps more importantly conceal aspects of the matter under investigation.

The question of gender and participation in music is an old one, but will remain relevant as long as women are marginalized. The proportion of women enrolling in Wintec’s commercial music degree is about 20%, measured over the five years surveyed (2004-8), a ratio typical of tertiary commercial music programmes in NZ. In local live original music scenes, the proportion of women performers is even lower. Why is this? Studies by Lucy Green (1997) and Mavis Bayton (1998, 1993) employ a mixture of ethnography and critical theory to research this issue in the UK, and I took these studies as a starting point.

Critical theory aims to reveal and interpret ideological patterns of power within everyday experience, in this case in relation to ideologies of gender and music. However, while critical theory is excellent at identifying constraints, problems and contradictions, it’s not always clear how it can set out a positive agenda, other than by addressing the problems it identifies. It doesn’t always engage with how people dwell within and work with contradictions, rather than trying to ‘solve’ them. Some strategies that enable women’s music-making could be interpreted as critical responses to social problems, but others do not work so much with or against dominant discourses but alongside them – that is,

agents or groups develop effective strategies to make music ‘on their own terms’ but without necessarily defining themselves against someone else’s terms. An example is the influence of religious worship on women’s musical participation, which is discussed later.

A related theoretical question arises around the way ideology works through binary oppositions in which one term is privileged, eg masculinity/femininity. Respondents often described their experience in precisely such terms: how men and women are “different”. How literally should the researcher take this? Under-interpreting responses might be viewed as endorsing ‘essential difference’, but over-interpreting risks reducing participants’ experience to false consciousness. Ethnographers must be careful to avoid imposing a totalising theoretical paradigm on the ‘Other’ – seeing what they want to see (Cooley 1996, 3). The approach developed here negotiates this tricky area by interpreting statements about gender difference not as essentialist but as offering hints about what an environment conducive to female participation might be like. Again, religious worship is critically examined to the degree that it can provide such an environment. My strategy was to reverse the hierarchy and elevate the usually devalued or marginalized to a position of prominence. Of course, it could be argued that reversing the terms of the opposition does not challenge the binary structure itself, but in this instance it seemed to provide a workable compromise between respondents’ ‘being-in-the-world’ and theoretical interpretation of that world.

METHOD

Ethnographic research is a new area for me, although I have drawn on participation in local ‘indie’ music scenes in previous research (Bannister 2006). Participant observation remains important in this study – I attend gigs regularly, perform, deejay at the University of Waikato student radio station (Contact FM) etc. Interviews with students were conducted by a research assistant. Some quantitative research was also done (collating enrolment figures in music and other Wintec programmes and gender ratios in other local tertiary commercial music programmes). To find student respondents, posters were put up around campus titled ‘Making music – does gender matter?’ Mainly women replied

(eventually nine women and two men were interviewed). It is unclear why men didn't volunteer and whether or not this was typical. Perhaps the wording of the poster could have been more positive – 'Would you like to see more women studying music at Wintec?' But this non-response could also highlight a problem of ethnography: "the dominant ... does not permit itself to be represented" (Shumway 2002, 19). In this case, dominant implies men. In addition, I interviewed musicians (10 women, one man) in Hamilton's live original music scene. My involvement in the scene made this quite easy, however, more effort could have been made to interview male non-student musicians. Perhaps the lack of male student responses and concerns about alienating people in a small scene contributed to the problem. This demonstrates a key problem in ethnographic research: how involvement enables some kinds of access but limits others. Participation brings one 'closer' to the subject matter, but it also introduces its own protocols. The consequence of this was that the study, which was initially framed to include male and female participants, became (even) more about the latter.

All student interviews followed the same basic format, starting with questions about musical background, education, influences and preferences, and some deliberately vague ones like 'what was your experience at Wintec? Did you have any particularly positive or negative experiences?' to allow interviewees to interpret the question in their own way. These supplied background knowledge and hopefully put respondents at their ease before more direct questions such as:

- Have you faced barriers to musical participation due to gender, ethnic or other identity issues?
- Has gender been an issue for you in the programme?
- Do you think the programme would benefit from more female tutors? (at the time of writing there were no female music tutors).

While one might expect direct questions to be the most revealing, background questions, when interpreted en masse, revealed important information, some of which was expected (many female students identified themselves as singer-songwriters), and some not (for example, church or religious worship as a formative influence). All interviews were

transcribed and transcriptions approved by respondents.

Interpretations of interviews must acknowledge the difficulty of reducing myriad perspectives to a coherent narrative. For example, two women non-student respondents insisted that gender was not an issue in their musical practice. It would be dishonest to exclude them on the grounds they didn't 'fit the model'. Interestingly, they were the most 'professional', full-time musicians interviewed, and hence perhaps reflection was a luxury they could ill afford; it being always easier to criticise from a position of non-involvement. And of course respondents have a right not to be 'labeled' - this is part of the ethnographic problem of 'Othering'. However, many respondents were happy to discuss gender, albeit mainly in terms of difference, which gave rise to a different kind of interpretive conundrum.

Statements about how 'the guys' and 'the girls' spoke or acted were very common, and were to some extent encouraged by the kinds of questions asked, which reflected the project's initial theoretical agenda. Examples included women being more sensitive to social interaction and emotional atmosphere, while men took a more goal or job-oriented approach based around effective performance rather than communication and consultation.

When they (the men) have a problem they um, they might get moody about it and stop talking about it ... And ... they kinda like change the atmosphere of the room. And you notice the girls will get quite affected by the atmosphere changing, and the boys notice but they just shut up... And you notice that the girls probably get over it a little bit slower than the guys ... [Men are] not quite as affected by the relationship aspect of that and they're not quite affected by the emotional aspect a lot of the time (Anita).

A questioner at the conference inquired whether such statements perpetuated gender stereotypes of the 'men are from Mars, women are from Venus' variety. However, these differences were 'real' for the respondents. Most invoked gender difference to identify and interpret situations of conflict, and this seems fair enough. But the question

highlighted the danger of taking responses at face value. On the other hand, if I was looking for ways that female participation in music could occur, it seemed to make sense to interpret these 'essentialist' statements as indicating 'things that women value': 'sensitivity' to emotional atmosphere; verbal communication and feedback; a non-judgmental communal environment in which performer/audience distinctions are blurred and music is an expression of common bonds. Of course, many would find these things desirable, but especially groups that already feel marginalized. I began to look for examples and situations which accommodated these concerns rather than dismissing them as ideological mystification. To put it another way, the initial theoretical framework became more problematic as the project proceeded. It lacked a framework for understanding how, to put it crudely, women musicians 'did it anyway' irrespective of 'talent' (Green 1997) and without an explicitly feminist agenda (Bayton 1993).

THEORY

My starting point, critical theory, implies critique of the social construction of ideologies with the aim of producing change. The link to feminist theory is clear: both share an agenda of dissatisfaction with the present, and a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' (demystification) towards common sense (Crotty 1998, 113). This can lead to problems, however, as with the two women musicians discussed above who didn't 'do' gender. Clearly there is a tension between critical theory's tendency to pass judgment and 'being-in-the-world', a Heideggerian phrase used in ethnography, which assumes that the researcher has to inhabit the world of his subjects, and live with the contradictory perspectives that may arise (Cooley 1996, 4).

Arguably, critical theory informed by ideology tends towards dystopianism or utopianism (Mills 1997, 30). Green describes and analyses how women are discouraged from participating in music, but states that only 'exceptional talent' can overcome these problems (Green 1997, 191). This is a fairly pessimistic conclusion. Bayton (1993) engages more closely with popular music (and like Green, deals with 1980s UK society), but has a utopian agenda around feminism, partly because her case study, 1980s women's independent rock music, united political rhetoric and musical practice to a degree

unprecedented at the time. But this was not the case with my study. Few respondents felt that feminism was relevant to them; NZ society in 2008 is different to 1980s UK (especially in relation to gender discourse) (Bannister 2005).

Perhaps both Green's apparent dead-end and Bayton's idealism stem from an ideological approach that can reify power and its associated subject positions (eg dominator and dominated) (Mills 1997, 38-42). The problematisation of identity and corresponding critique of ideology that Foucault proposes might suggest that a focus on gender difference, rather than difference in general, is essentialist, and that we focus instead on the production of difference rather than the elements which are being differentiated, precisely because these elements are products of the differentiating field of power rather than pre-existing subjects (Macarthur 2009, 54; Mills 1997, 32-36). Sally Macarthur suggests that this approach can lead to political quietism and is one reason why work on women and music has decreased in recent years (56). Foucault, however, suggests that empowerment is about struggle and survival, not liberation, and using rather than rejecting existing discourses and practices (Halperin 1997, 31). "Master" discourses and institutions are never unilaterally repressive or intransigent; rather power circulates. There may be places or opportunities "within the system" that enable women to make music. One example that emerged from my research is charismatic churches, which are not generally known for their progressive gender politics. This example may also demonstrate how over-reliance on one theoretical model can lead one to initially overlook a significant theme.

CHURCH

A number of respondents mentioned church as a formative influence:

I learnt a lot through church 'cause ... they play a lot of rock music and soft rock ... you can learn a lot of the skills through doing that (Anita).

Music is part of church culture ... as a singer you gain confidence ... people not involved in churches don't get those opportunities ... Now I look back at it, I was learning a lot of performance skills (Wanda).

Wanda, who performs in a group with other women, explicitly related this experience to her group's formation: 'We were a group of friends and all have that background of singing in church and none of us were involved anymore, we used to like the fact that we were in a group singing together.'

While it is a commonplace that Christian worship has historically been closely connected with the music of ethnic minorities such as black Americans (and thus, indirectly, with most popular music), its relationship to other marginalized groups, such as women, has been less discussed. Wanda and her friends experienced church musicmaking not as performing to an audience, with the concomitant connotations of gaze and judgment, but rather about participating in a group to make music. 'Because of the context (of worship) you have this attitude of learning songs but of then being open to things happening, listening to what's happening in a dynamic' (Wanda). Christopher Small uses the term, 'musicking', to describe the way that 'Music is not a thing at all but an activity, something that people do' (1998, 2). Musicking is a 'social group... using sounds in certain relationships for a ceremony which explores, affirms and celebrates shared values' (1998, 183), a communal activity in which 'everyone' participates.

While 'performance' is central to 'musicking', David Shumway points out that it also implies evaluation, that is, an audience and a public setting (Shumway 1999). But if 'everyone' participates, who are they performing for – themselves? The point is that 'performance' (a term used in the research question) is ideologically loaded if it excludes situations of communal musicmaking which may straddle the public/private divide. So this was another way in which theoretical presuppositions were called into question by my findings.

Communal ‘musicking’ emerged as important for these women because it suggests a supportive learning environment. Christopher Small suggests that in musicking social group precedes music, which functions as an exploration and affirmation of the group (this is not to say that it can’t happen the other way round, but again, for a marginal group, some kind of ‘security’ or sense of belonging may be a prerequisite for musical participation). Church featured in this case explicitly as a model for a certain type of social interaction in which musical performance features strongly. It is possible to argue that charismatic churches, with their emphasis on participation, can provide a kind of intermediary space between public and private spheres in which musical skills can be developed in a relatively non-judgmental environment. On the other hand, the fact that women in this example are encouraged to sing rather than play does suggest that religious gender conservatism does still restrict women’s participation in musicking.

CONCLUSION

In the course of this project, the data collected ended up challenging most of my initial presuppositions. My research question contained terms like “performance” which became problematic, for example, if it assumed performing in a public space. The critical theory approach, while it revealed various factors that inhibited woman’s musical creativity, did not help explain how creative practice could occur outside an explicitly feminist framework. I found myself questioning the idea that gender difference always supports hegemony. Rather it seemed that there were different kinds of competencies and standards of judgment which women demonstrated, but these remain largely unappreciated and unacknowledged in the public sphere that we normally associate with popular music ‘performance’. Finally, churches and religious worship emerged as a special kind of social space that enabled participation in a communal context. Arguably such spaces are at a premium in contemporary Western societies. Thus the relationship between religious worship, women and popular music participation could be fertile grounds for further research.

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