Gender, Popular Music and Australian Identity: 
Introduction to Special Issue

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Abstract

This introduction gives an overview of the limited literature that is available on the subject of gender and popular music in the Australian context. Despite demonstrable ongoing gender disparity in the Australian music industry, very little academic attention has been paid to this issue. This special edition aims to at least partly address this gap. This opening article introduces the texts for the special issue, and places them into a framework that will demonstrate the relevance and importance of the special issue in terms of finding space for the debates on gender in this field.

Keywords: Australia; gender; inequality; popular music

Introduction

In mid-2015, a series of striking images went viral on social media, showing posters for a range of big music festivals with the names of male artists or all-male bands removed (see “A Man’s World?” 2015). The expanses of empty space that remained at the end of this exercise spoke eloquent volumes about the continued marginalization of women in the music industry. The story these posters tell is reinforced through almost every measure by which music making can be analysed. For example, in Australia, despite women making up 50% of music students, only 20% of the Australian Performing Rights Association’s registered songwriters are women, and only 20–30% of songs played on radio are by women artists (AIR 2011). A small-scale survey run by the music industry peak body in the Australian state of Victoria reported that the pay
gap between men and women working in the arts and recreation industries was almost two per cent higher than the already high 17.9% national wage gap (Music Victoria 2015). The women who participated in the survey made comments such as the following:

- Feeling of being considered a “female musician” instead of just a “musician”.
- Male egos taking credit for female-initiated achievements and lack of recognition professionally due to male-dominated industry.
- As a female artist I commonly get comments from males saying “I didn’t expect you to be able to play guitar so well”.
- I feel I have more pressure to look, be and sound a certain way (which I don’t and am not) in order to be successful.

The feelings of exclusion and marginalization expressed here reflect the findings from over two decades of international research on women in music that consistently argue that musical spaces are often guarded masculine territories and policed in a variety of ways (see, for instance, Strong and Rogers in this issue for an overview of this literature).

Even in the areas where women have the most success, usually in pop music, this comes with a gender-specific price. Research by Lieb (2013) and Hatton and Trautner (2011) has demonstrated the pressure on female artists to conform to specific “types” in order to advance their careers, and the way in which this often involves being marketed as a sex object. This sexualization has increased, rather than decreased, over time for the most successful women artists. And once again, despite the presence of big-hitters such as Beyoncé and Madonna, even when they do find chart success, women’s careers last for a shorter period in this space than men’s (Lieb 2013). This needs also to be understood in a context where pop music, the place where women have found the most success, is still considered culturally inferior to music coded as more masculine (such as rock and rap).

Despite this strong evidence that suggests that gender still has a very significant effect in terms of who can participate in music making, there has been very little work on this area undertaken in the Australian context. In a previous article (Strong 2014: 152), I have demonstrated that the various edited collections that have been produced on Australian music neglect gender as a significant or sustained category of analysis ... The exception to this is Hayward’s *From Pop to Punk to Postmodernism* (1992), which includes a chapter that, while acknowledging the gender imbalance in Australian music scenes, concentrates on women as audience members rather than performers.
Other work exists that looks at women in marginalized positions in Australian society (such as Indigenous women and immigrants), or on the racialized reception of certain non-Anglo women (see Stratton 2007). A small amount of work also exists on masculinity and its centrality to the construction of identity in Australian music scenes and subcultures (see Young 2004; Overell 2010; Driver 2011). Given the vibrancy of popular music scholarship in Australia over the last thirty years, the lack of further in-depth discussion of this topic demonstrates a substantive gap in the literature, which means there exist little data on the extent to which women participate in music making in an Australian context, either now or in the past, or what factors influence their experiences in this space. This special issue hopes to offer a corrective to this omission, and to spark new debates about whether and how gender matters to music making in Australia.

The articles included in this issue all demonstrate in one way or another how Australia’s unique positioning in the world of popular music impacts on gendered expressions and expectations. Australian popular music has always been heavily influenced by imports from the USA and UK, with releases from these countries dominating the Australian charts, and artists reproducing imported sounds. This has led local scholars to argue that “to look for ‘the Australian’ element [in Australian popular music] is to look for an inflection, the distinctive modification of an already internationally established musical style” (Turner, quoted in Homan 2010: 218). Such global flows, however, are always translated in ways that suit local identities and conditions when taken up in new locations. All articles in this special issue discuss this tension in the Australian music scene by considering how music is always drawing on influences from elsewhere, but also constructing something unique and local. To understand such local inflections in Australia, geography needs to be taken into consideration. Australia is not only isolated from those areas it most often draws upon culturally, but centres of music making within the country are also isolated from each other. The music industry in Australia, including circuits of touring and the live music experience, works differently to those in more densely populated countries. The way in which these factors can then shape gendered expressions that could be described as “Australian” in some way is discussed in a number of the articles here, namely in Strong and Rogers’s article on how an Australian feminist rock moment that draws on Riot Grrrl cannot separate itself from the conventions of the local music industry because Australia is too small; in Hoad’s article on the use of very specific moments of Australian history to reinforce the masculine nature of the extreme metal scene; and in Gunn’s article on the way in which the physical aspects of gender become the focus of humour in the Australian breaking scene.
The special issue opens with two articles that look at aspects of the history of popular music in Australia and explore places where women’s contribution to that history has not been fully articulated to date. Opening this theme, Liz Giuffre presents an article on women in early music television in Australia. Television arrived late in Australia and developed slowly, taking time to extend its reach beyond the major cities of Sydney and Melbourne. Much of the content of early shows, including the subject of this article, Six O’Clock Rock, has been lost over time. The narrative that has been created in historical accounts of rock ‘n’ roll in Australia puts men, such as Six O’Clock Rock host Johnny O’Keefe, at the centre of this story. Without actual footage from these shows, counteracting this idea is difficult, but by using archival research Giuffre demonstrates that women were not just present on, but central to Six O’Clock Rock. While the show is usually remembered as a showcase for O’Keefe, Giuffre shows that his female co-hosts, such as Ricki Merriman, were central to the appeal of the show. In fact, by appealing to a domestic milieu beyond the rock boys and teenage girls usually conceived of as the show’s demographic, these women brought rock to a wider audience. Giuffre’s reinstatement of these women into the Six O’Clock Rock history is not just a corrective, but a provocation to other researchers to think about how “lost” areas of popular music history can be reconstructed.

Moving to a later period of Australian rock history, Strong and Rogers’s article examines the growth of women-only or women-centric rock bands in the 1990s, and the influence of Riot Grrrl on them. Using archival and media sources, they document the origins of a number of these bands in Melbourne’s Rock’n’Roll High School, an institution dedicated to teaching girls and women how to play instruments and learn about other aspects of the music industry. As the school developed closer ties to the alt-rock scene from the USA (including hosting visiting musicians such as L7 and Sonic Youth), it also became more clearly aligned with the ideas and aesthetics associated with Riot Grrrl. Other reflections of Riot Grrrl culture also developed in Australia, including an influential zine, Grot Grrrl, whose name became a catch-all label for all-women bands appearing in the country. These bands were not, however, particularly unified, and while some expressed feminist ideals and seemed clearly influenced by Riot Grrrl, others were not. Strong and Rogers’s article, then, not only documents the activities of these bands, which have generally otherwise been left out of discussions of Australian rock at this time, but shows the unique ways in which Australian music scenes work with influences from outside, combining local knowledges with global flows.

The next two articles take a different approach, using autoethnography to focus on how music is experienced through gendered bodies. In her article on b-girls in the Sydney breaking scene, Rachael Gunn uses Deleuze and
Guattari’s theories on de- and re-territorialization to explore female breakers’ uses of their bodies, and how they can disturb the masculine spaces of hip hop. Using her own experiences as one of very few b-girls in the city, Gunn explores the way in which b-girls have to work against what they have been taught is appropriate or possible for feminine bodies in order to participate in breaking. At the same time, however, the presence of such bodies in a masculine scene, and the challenges they present for what it means to be masculine or feminine, produces new possibilities and ways of being. Gunn also discusses how this takes on specifically Australian dimensions in battles. For instance, she presents evidence of how both Australian b-boys and b-girls use humorous representations of body parts such as genitals and breasts in battles, and relates this to the notion of the “larrikin” (a good-hearted mischief maker).

Following from this, Lauren Istvandity’s piece on female jazz musicians in Brisbane (the capital of the state of Queensland) draws on her own experiences as a jazz vocalist in this scene. Her ethnographic analysis discusses the way women vocalists suffer from a double disadvantage: they are taken less seriously both because of their gender, and because vocalists are often not considered “proper” musicians by jazz instrumentalists. She discusses the strategies open to female vocalists in terms of their self-presentation that allow them to assert their expertise, but notes that as these strategies are different for audiences and other musicians this can create new tensions in terms of self-management.

The following article by Catherine Hoad focuses on masculinity in Australian extreme metal. Hoad looks at an Australian sub-genre of extreme metal, blackened thrash or “war metal”, and discusses how war metal bands use specific events in Australian history to help construct a sense of a national scene, despite the isolated nature of the metal scenes based in Australian cities. These bands use important events in Australia’s military history (particularly the Gallipoli campaign in 1915) and iconic figures, such as the bushranger (an outlaw) and the rebellious gold miner, to create a sense of connectedness across far-flung locations. However, these aspects of Australian identity all serve an exclusionary function as well as an inclusive one, as they all place white masculinity at the centre of what it means to belong to Australia. In this way, the Australian metal scene, while still transgressive in terms of its musicality, supports the mainstream narrative about what is important in Australian identity (a version of Australianness that also closely resembles that promoted by right-wing nationalist groups).

The final article of this special issue is an interview with Evelyn Morris, founder of Melbourne feminist music collective LISTEN. Since its beginning in 2014 when the collective focused on creating a counter-narrative to the male-
centric histories of musical activity in Australia, LISTEN has branched into a number of different areas of musical activity. The group now runs a record label, puts on regular gigs, has organized one conference on issues faced by women in the music industry (with another one planned), and has successfully influenced policy in the area of safety at live music venues. This interview, then, gives a timely snapshot of feminist activity relating to music, and how women collectively find ways to claim space in male-dominated areas.

While the articles in the special issue cover a range of disciplines and provide a snapshot of selected and emerging scholarship on the topic of Gender, Popular Music and Australian Identity, I also acknowledge that this issue does not reflect the intersectional nature of many current manifestations of feminism. The authors of the articles and the music scenes they are discussing are predominantly white, and there is likewise little mention of diverse sexual identities. It will no doubt be dissatisfying to many people that a special issue on gender in Australia does not include a discussion of the role gender plays in the music making of Indigenous Australians (see the work of Gibson and Dunbar-Hall 2004; Barney 2014 and Ottosson 2016 which fill in some gaps in this area). The issue does, however, bring to light new research that not only substantially increases the existing knowledge on the position of women in Australian music, but opens up new areas for debate and highlights directions for future research. The consideration of what it is that is “Australian” about each of the areas discussed in the issue, and how this context shapes the gendered experiences of participants in music scenes, also adds to knowledge on the development of locally versions of global music forms. Australian women face barriers specific to the Australian context, and develop solutions that are equally specific. We hope this issue is just the starting point for new and rigorous debate on the inequalities women face in popular music in Australia.

References


1. It is worth noting that excellent work on queerness in Australian music scenes is already in print (e.g. Taylor 2012).


