

Women and Electronic Music

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Iris Garrelf sketches her view of how it is and where it's going

There are many words being used for women:

Bitch, slut, whore...

Nerd is not amongst them.

Just try conjuring up a general if imprecise picture about women in electronic music, and the screen stays as good as blank. You widen the aperture a little to include more aspects of current musical activity, from pop to classical, and a barrage of so called girl power in mini skirts and wonderbras springs into focus. Singers mainly, and one classical violin player performing music whilst also participating in a wet t-shirt competition (anyone recognise the publicity for a well-known classical violinist?).

On the outskirts of the image you also find mainly vocalists: Diamanda Galas, Laurie Anderson, Björk, Sheila Chandra, and a few bizarrely shaped, colourful, tiny islands, inhabited by creatures like Pauline Oliveros (not a singer). In other words, the part that women have traditionally been strong in: beautiful heroines of vocal exertions.

Now narrow the aperture, gaining some depth of field into the inner windings of electronic music and numerous women become visible, behind desks, on the phone, running labels and PR companies. The part that women seem to play in pushing the electronic revolution forward is one mainly behind the scenes.

There is, for example, Bettina Richards of Thrill Jockey who single handedly brought us Tortoise. There also are numerous press officers responsible for boosting the likes of Autechre and Spring Heel Jack into the media limelight. There is not much coverage in music magazines about women actually participating in the creative aspects of the music industry – the sole exception being scantily clad club birds, with photographers trying to get a glimpse under their skirts, which admittedly is not very difficult.

Reminder: women were 'allowed' the vote less than 100 years ago, then severed from domesticity by two world wars. And still, women get paid less for the same work as men, have problems gaining a sufficient pension after having been housewives and bringing up the next generation. The abortion issue, which still is not settled once and for all, looms large. What about the American fundamentalist Christian sect, The Promise Keepers, where men proclaim they take 'responsibility' again, god bless them, including the lead in the family household, almost acting out scenes from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*? All this en route to the next millennium! In short, it's early days, and habits and perceptions both on male and female sides, die hard.

Before the advent of the gramophone, respectable ladies were employed in home entertainment, learning (from a very early age) how to play the piano and how to sing. All in the course of ensnaring an eligible bachelor, no doubt. Not to be mixed up with the girls of loose repute dancing and singing in playhouses. Hardly any credit has been given to serious female musicians and composers, none of them being allowed to increase their skills at music academies. You probably have heard about the 11th century Abbess Hildegard von Bingen; her religious music has seen many releases recently. Few will be aware of the composer Clara Schumann, whose husband Robert Schumann is the one recognised in music history.

Respectable work included being a governess, a teacher and over the years it has gradually become more acceptable to be a female scientist, writer or even a politician – providing you are either an iron lady or stick to education and health. Entertainment in its wider sense still ranks low on the respectability scale (with the exception of classical music and maybe jazz).

How much has all this got to do with electronic music, with the weaving of sound carpets or cutting up of beats, with booming sub bass and blinding speed?

So far, the question has mainly been: why are there so few women active in the creation of electronic music? I have deliberately abstained from a definition of this term to keep everyone's imagination free to bounce between different aspects, from the electronic avant-garde to speed garage and hiphop.

Technology, essentially, is nothing on its own: a bare metal box, circuitry and various controls to play with. This box, without awareness as to who is the manipulator, does not care what sex, race or religion you belong to. Even if it did I don't think it could be bothered to waste the energy. Any piece of technology is only as good as the person who touches it, a clean board on which everything imaginable can be written. So, why are there not more women using technology, computers and the freedom they give? Do women see a keyboard and only think of typing?

Sadie Plant's interesting *Zero's and One's. Digital Women + The New Technology*, argues that women actually have been at the forefront of new technology usage from weaving through to word processing. It is only perception that leads us to believe men play a more dominant role.

She draws attention to the fact that Byron's daughter Ada Lovelace was an intimate associate of one Charles Babbage, inventor of the difference engine, forerunner of computer technology, giving her as much right to the title



'pioneer' as Babbage himself. (NB: Alan Turing, first-wave computer programmer, was given a sex-change enforced by the US government because he was gay.)

Long forgotten also is the fact that the dawn of electronic music saw women using and mastering the first electronic instruments: the Theremin, used by Clara Rockwell and the Ondes Marlenot which has been used by Messiaen's sister-in-law Jeanne Loriod. So when women do get around to actually creating and producing music, is what they do in any way different from male 'knob twiddling'? Is there a difference in style, application or motivation?

Personal history

I learned to play the piano for a few years, but when my parents tried pressing the violin on me I finally revolted. I joined the very rebellious, chic and underground local high school band, where I was, surprise, surprise, fit only for singing, throwing my long blonde hair about and offering the odd bit of lyric.

After further experiences around the musical globe, including a stop-over at the music academy in Berlin to train in classical singing, I found myself so annoyed with the 'old' musical worlds, that I invested in an Atari, at that time the height of musical advancement, and other necessary gear. Freedom at last!!

Still males reigned supreme and many, many people did not even bother to listen to what a mere girl had to say. On the other hand, how often do you see women lovingly discussing the merits of sampling with this or that sampler, breakbeat dissemination and the advantage of Cubase against Notator? I currently study Sound Engineering with only one other girl. One of the tutors constantly muses about football and scoring birds...

But still: technology gives us freedom from concepts in which women never had a place. Interesting to note at this point that the word seems finally to get around, and the

Sprawl Club, which I run in London featuring all things electronic and fun in a hassle-free environment, has seen many more female visitors over the last year. Nerdettes, here we come!

The discussion about male and female qualities in music is often derived from the perceived difference in sexuality. This describes male music as essentially 'penile' and 'thrusting', the obvious example here being rock'n'roll, and female music as 'vaginal' and 'womb-like', referring to everything that is more intricate and soft and hidden. This separation of genders is even more visible in tribal cultures, where music is usually divided into a female and male branch, both meeting, for example, in fertility rites and even here each has a different role to play. Women's creativity is assigned to the ultimate in creation, the bearing and rearing of children.

Women are also said to be better communicators, better suited to and more interested in the art of understanding, and vocal music is generally seen to be more soulful and humane than, say, breakbeats. The role that women play in music in general is one closely connected with more or less blatant sex. The electronic world is hardly concerned with glamour, most DJ's actually preferring the safe cloak of anonymity. I love singing very much, but I have yet to find a satisfying role for vocals within electronic music.

A last note on the subject of singing: a singing computer has been developed by Microsoft and doesn't even sound all that bad ...

PS: I am organising a very subversive all girls' club event under the Sprawl umbrella, but no-one's gonna know ... Watch this space!

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