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**Female Performers in Non-classical Music:  
Focusing on the Individual and  
Individuality**

Kylie Johnston

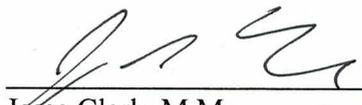
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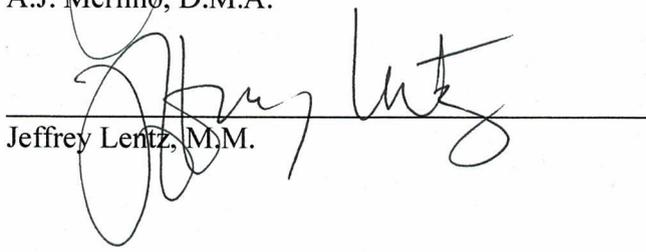
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Kylie Johnston  
Senior Thesis

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Thesis Advisor: Jesse Clark

Honors Thesis

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Female Performers in Non-Classical Music: Focusing on the Individual and Individuality

The ideal of focusing on women as individuals began to be emphasized in the 1970s. Multiple well-known women in the realm of non-classical music performance including performers like Janis Joplin and Annie Lenox have run with the idea of individualism and used it to advance how female musical performers are viewed in society. The aforementioned women and countless others have empowered women to express themselves as they have previously. Women's expression and acknowledgement of their individuality in music will be examined through interviews with current non-classical female performers. The way that these women approach their identity in conjunction with their art will also be examined. Through historical information and these interviews, I hope to learn about how non-classical female performers in music perceive the environment they work and perform in as well as how they navigate their identity as individuals.

In 1962, Betty Friedan's book The Feminist Mystique was released. The book highlighted the struggle mass amounts of women in America faced at the time. The book served as a catalyst for major change in how women viewed their situations (Menand). Friedan's book is credited with starting what came to be termed "the second wave" of feminism in America (The 1960s-70s American Feminist Movement: Breaking Down Barriers for Women). With this change in American culture, women banded together and began organizing sit-ins, creating organizations

such as The National Organization for Women also known as “NOW,” and fighting for social and workplace equality for women as a whole (Napikoski).

In the 1970s, ideas of reflection on one’s self began to rise within the realm of feminism. Along with this notion came the ideal of examining a woman as her individual self instead of examining her in relation to the men around her (Tong, 24). As time progressed, female musicians that expressed themselves more freely as individuals gained recognition for their sense of individuality and tendency to not fit into the genre specific molds expected by society. The reception of these non-conforming women was not always positive, but they paved the way for female musicians and non-musicians alike to be more expressive of their individuality in their professions (Whiteley). Looking back, these women were and still are empowering figures who refused to conform to societies views of what women were “supposed to be.”

One example of a non-classical female musician who ran with her individuality and smashed the societal mold of what a female performer is “supposed to be” is Janis Joplin. From a young age Joplin was branded as an “unattractive, weirdo” because she did not fit society’s ideas of how a young woman should look and act. Joplin smoked, drank, and advocated for sexual freedom while simultaneously being “one of the boys” (Whiteley, 57). A Washington Post Article reminiscing on Joplin recalls her by saying:

“You think of that sweaty and sometimes porcine face. Of the bad complexion. Of the tangled hair. Of the mouth eating the microphone. Of the pink feather boas. Of the layers of bracelets. Of the tattoos. Of the fifths of Southern Comfort carried onstage. Of that wild hillbilly cackle” (Hendrickson).

This language does not exactly paint the picture of what is generally considered beautiful by society especially in the time when Joplin was at large. Janis Joplin used her writing in conjunction with how she presented herself to help her express her individuality, and even though Joplin was seen as a “woman competing in a man’s world” (Pavletic,126), that did not stop her from exuding extreme confidence and power through many of her songs (Whiteley, 66). Unfortunately, for Joplin her empowering lyrics and music in general were not always the focus of the public. As Joplin said herself, “Interviewers don’t talk about my singing as much as about my lifestyle” (Gaar 106). Janis Joplin always expressed herself as an individual through her position as a non-classical performing musician, that also lead to social obstacles such as being looked down upon by the public in addition to the obstacles already set in place by her being female.

With the onset of MTV in the 1980s, imagery and visuals suddenly became even more important to musicians’ careers. This shift to more visual presentation of recorded content led to a large confrontation with the female image. Non-conforming musicians such as Annie Lenox were initially under-represented in this new landscape (Whiteley, 123). Annie Lenox was a non-classical performing musician brimming with individuality, and she was certainly non-conforming. With slicked back hairstyles and androgynous style often consisting of suits, Lenox played with the “cultural construction of sexuality and power dynamics” (Whiteley, 124). She herself stated that “Almost putting on the male suit gave me more power,” (Irwin, 24). In a more recent 2014 interview with PrideSource, Lenox made a statement about why she presents the way she does and how she views herself saying:

“When I was given this label of ‘gender bender,’ I really felt it was diminishing in a way... I wasn’t bending gender; I was making a statement in a kind of subtle way. I thought it was subtle, but to some people it might have seemed overt. I was saying, ‘Look, as a woman I can be equal to a man’ and in this partnership with the Eurythmics... the two of us felt so connected that my gender didn’t matter. In a funny sort of way, ultimately, I was coming out to say, ‘Look, I’m not going to be what you think I am. I’m intelligent. I’m not a dancing doll just because I’m female and I’m singing. I’m not singing for your pleasurable entertainment. It’s not about that. It’s cerebral and it’s heartfelt and it’s intelligent” (Azzopardi).

By including brief examples of non-conforming non-classical female musicians from history I hope to give a small amount of background to the types of issues that may be expressed by the current non-classical female performing musicians I have interviewed. It is my hope that these interviews will illustrate the individualism of these women and how they navigate issues encountered within their profession. In addition, I used my research of non-classical female musical performers such as Janis Joplin and Annie Lenox to formulate the questions I posed to the non-classical female musical performers that I interviewed. I tried to formulate questions that would lead to larger conversation, while not seeming biased overall.

The Interviews were conducted in hopes of finding similarities in the experiences of non-classical female performers today as well as to highlight the women as individuals within the realm of non-classical musical performance. Hopefully this written reflection on the responses I obtained will serve as an appropriate companion to the recorded responses themselves and help

to reflect on the information and insight gained through the process of interviewing these non-classical female musical performers.

The interviews were conducted over the course of three weeks and took place over the phone or as a questionnaire form when requested. Only one of the women interviewed chose to write out her responses, as she felt it would give her more time to reflect on the questions and give thoughtful answers. The phone interviews were recorded in order to aid in the examination of responses. I interviewed six women from the surrounding areas of Berks and Lancaster county. I had made acquaintance with one of the women at once of her performances prior to asking her to participate in the interviews, while I had had no prior contact with any of the other women before asking them to be participants in the interviews. The women were all non-classical performers within the realms of pop, jazz, funk, and folk music at the time of the interviews. Although some of them had originally been classically trained, all had years of experience performing in the non-classical genres previously stated. Some of the women interviewed still cited performance as their main occupation while some currently only perform on the side of another main occupation or only occasionally more so as a hobby.

At the onset of all of the interviews, all of the women were asked to give some information about their background in music, how they got where they are today, how often they perform, and what they perform. This step in the interview provided a basis for what each individual had been involved in, what they were interested in, and also gave an introduction that set the mood of the rest of the interview. Obviously, these answers were among the most varied from interviews but very necessary to discuss because as mentioned previously, we are still examining each of the women's experiences separately from one another. All of these women are being assessed as individuals in addition to having trends among all of the women assessed. Most of the

subsequent questions in the interviews could be related back to the women's responses about their backgrounds in music. This aided in flow of the interviews and gave a little more information to work off of for the questions that followed.

The women's responses when questioned about their backgrounds in music varied greatly. A common thread among them, however, was that most of the women were involved in music in high school but opted not to pursue music in post-secondary education. Musician D stated that ultimately deciding not to pursue a college degree in music was the right decision for her, and she actually no longer plays the instrument that she would have pursued a performance degree in. She went on to explain that her interest in performance actually dropped off for a few years after school before picking back up again while playing a different instrument. Some of the women responded to the question about their backgrounds by stating that they formed bands in high school that they played with for years after graduation, while some pursued different avenues after school while still performing on the side. Musician B, who still approaches performance as more of a side endeavor, stated that, "I never really made the move...it seemed like a very difficult profession to make a living...I'm happy to do it in my spare time." From the onset of the interviews it became very obvious that even within my sample of non-classical female performing musicians, all of the women had very different views of musical performance and their role in their field of musical performance.

To further the conversation about their careers and experiences, I asked about any social obstacles the women may have faced as performers. My follow up to that question was about whether or not the women felt that any of those obstacles had been related to the fact that they were female. The women's responses to my question about social obstacles also varied greatly which was slightly surprising to me. It was interesting that multiple women said that they did not

face many social obstacles other than obstacles that were “self-inflicted.” These “self-inflicted” obstacles included anxieties surrounding their creativity and performance in general. On the other hand, some of the women I interviewed cited the times where the notion of inter-band relationships would have an effect on their ability to go about business as usual. Likewise, many of the women stated that having other male musicians assuming the women were interested in them romantically would impede them from carrying out tasks without having to be conscious of the male performers around them and how they were being perceived. Both of the women who acknowledged having faced these obstacles also pointed out the fact that the creation music and performance of music in itself is a very intimate and often romantic action. This type of mood can always lead to speculation of relationships between artists being more than just professional or friendly. Sometimes relationships within bands do become romantic but as Musician E stated in her interview, “I’ve been in other bands with men, and my relationships remained strictly musical and friendly. Still there are rumors, and people keep a close watch.” Two of the women interviewed also brought up the issue of people always assuming they were “with the band” instead of being in the band. To quote Musician B, “Not that it was every really negative or that they didn’t believe me but a lot of people were surprised that I was in the band... It kind of surprises a lot of people when I do sing and perform.” Another obstacle that one of the women recalled facing was the issue of being categorized in everything. Musician C in particular was bothered by the idea that just because she is in a band with other women “now its [classified as] chick rock... why do you have to specify?” While the responses about obstacles faced as non-classical female musical performers varied greatly, I was still able to reflect upon the responses I obtained.

I was very interested by the fact that the most common responses revolving around social obstacles the women faced were about supposed romantic involvements and issues of people assuming they were “with the band” rather than in the band. Both of these responses were ones that I expected. Answers about facing obstacles mostly inflicted by one’s own anxieties was a response I was not expecting as much, but upon reflection, makes a lot of sense. Once again, the responses to questions about social obstacles faced by the women were varied among the women interviewed. This is not only because they perform in different settings, with different music, but above all else because they are individuals who are dealing with their own individual situations. It was pointed out by Musician C that the obstacles she faced may have to do with the music scene she is a part of or the other musicians she finds herself around most.

I then transitioned into asking the women about their freedom to express themselves as performers and whether or not they felt as though they had sufficient freedom to do so. All of the women said that they did have sufficient freedom, however, once they elaborated on the avenues they took to express themselves, their methods for doing such were very different. Musician E responded say that she expresses herself as an artist through “various forms of exhibitionism,” stating that she “takes her freedom,” as opposed to waiting for it to be given to her. Other women who played in bands that preform a lot of cover songs talked about how they express themselves through arranging preexisting tunes into their preferred styles that suit them. When asked this question about whether or not she felt that she had sufficient freedom to express herself through her work as a performer, Musician B made a statement about songwriters and performers in general saying, “I do think sometimes it can kind of impede you from doing something you really do like and expressing yourself in a certain way.” She followed this statement by saying that this can be a good thing, it forces you out of your comfort zone. This question about

expressive freedom was one of the only questions asked where the basis of the women's answers were more or less the same. I think this is due to the fact that the women that I was interviewing were consciously making sure that they were doing what they wanted instead of allowing their creative expression to be thwarted.

When asked about whether the women interviewed felt their persona on stage matched their persona in everyday life most of the women felt that their stage persona either matched their everyday selves pretty closely or that their stage person was just a variation of their day to day persona. A few of the women did say, however, that there is a fair amount of distinction between their everyday and stage personas. Musician B cited the example that while performing you have to engage with your audience, but after the show is over you might not just go and talk to those people with the same openness you had during your performance.

As a follow-up to my question about the women's stage personas I asked the women if the way they dress and visually present themselves on stage and as performers matched how they dress and visually present themselves in everyday life. Once again, most of the women interviewed felt that they currently dress and visually present themselves the same during performances as they do in everyday life, or as Musician C stated, "maybe just a little more put together [while performing]." A lot of the women expressed the fact that they dress how they are comfortable, and for most of them what they wear every day is what is most comfortable. One of the women spoke about being in a band at one point that wore matching costumes and the fact that at first it was a fun thing, but wearing the costumes and matching all of the time and wearing costumes got old, so that idea didn't last long before she was back to dressing in more of her everyday outfits. For the most part, the responses to this question stayed within this vein of the

women presenting very similar to their everyday selves because that is how they are most comfortable.

Two of the women had substantially different answers than the others when asked if the way they dress and visually present themselves on stage and as a performer matches how they dress and visually present themselves in everyday life. Musician E stated that, “I guess getting dressed up and doing my make-up is part of my pre-show ritual, and always has been. It brings me into focus for what I am about to do.” This response was also the only response that mentioned the concept of a preshow ritual to get into the mode of performing and doing so with clothes and makeup. Musician E also stated that “When my children would have school functions, it was often hard for me to find appropriate clothing to wear. My closet would be filled with more flashy and skimpy garb... I made many an emergency trip to Goodwill to find something more befitting of the situation.” Obviously, this is in reference to the very specific situation of a child’s school function, but I felt as though it still illustrated the idea that this woman in particular still had to make a separation between her appearance on stage and in normal life in order to be accepted in a situation. The other woman that gave an answer that varied from Musician F who stated:

“I do feel, when I do take the band stand, I kind of have to transform and kind of you know take on this role of my goal being to entertain these people and I need to be living the songs I’m performing... [Things] need to be put on pause when I go on stage. The show must go on... the performer, I consider it a separate entity.”

These responses about having separate stage appearances aligned more with what I thought the responses would be. Upon reflection and realizing that not all of the women that I interviewed perform for a living, having a street and stage personality as well as another work personality could become exhausting. Cultivating multiple personas seems to become a very personal and per-person decision and cannot be generalized very easily.

For those of the women that have written their own music, I asked them if there were specific avenues they took when doing so. I asked whether or not there were specific ideas, language or styles they gravitated to most. Most of the women who had written their own music, asserted the fact that they write from their own experiences. Their music tends to be real and emotional. One of the more interesting responses was given by Musician A who stated that while she did write her own music occasionally, she often second guessed whether it was good enough and rarely actually performed any of the music she wrote herself. It made sense because music is such a deeply personal medium, but was not something I had previously thought would play a role with these women since they are performers. Once again, this response brought back and reinforced the ever-important concept that these women are individuals and humans with insecurities just like everyone else despite being performers. Their own identity is something they must navigate throughout their careers that can be shaped and changed by many factors. Some of the other woman stated that while they are never really striving for a specific sound, no matter the song they write they make a point of trying not to censor their material, and to stay very real and raw with the emotions of their music. One response included something that surprised me very much: Musician B stated that while she does write her own music, if she writes something that seems too stereotypical or like something people would expect of a female musician, she won't perform it. She stated that "I'll write a song and I like the song but it sounds

too folky...I don't like to fall into that trap because that's what's expected... I intentionally will stay away from that genre because I feel like that's what is expected of women songwriters... Even if it's a song I like I'll kind of shy away from it or try to make changes to it." This idea was very interesting and the fact that these women really don't want to fall into stereotypes was really cemented when I received this response. Some of the women would rather rework something they have written than conform to societies preconceived notions of non-classical female musicians, and that was very inspiring to me. These women want to be seen as individuals.

When I posed the question "Do you think that the fact that you are a woman influences how you approach your art?" Musician E immediately pointed out the fact that she does feel a bit freer to approach her art from an emotional standpoint when she stated, "I think being a woman makes it easier for the way I choose to approach my art than it might be for a man. I believe there is more of an underlying societal expectation for women to be more emotional than men... to be more prone to hysterics, while men are supposed to be more stoic." Another woman spoke about how being a female performer in and of itself influences her to work harder and exceed all expectations set for her. Musician B said that "women have to kind of work a little harder to get the same respect... I really do have to exceed expectations... to have people really take notice or take interest... I like exceeding expectations... But I think it is more difficult for women because of that." This notion was expressed by multiple women that I interviewed.

I also asked the women if they felt the need to conform to social standards within their profession of non-classical music performance. While many women said they don't feel the need to conform they said they understand why some people feel the need to. The women who perform more as side gigs did not worry as much about the standards in the culture around them. A lot of the women interviewed seemed to actually make a point of not conforming to social

standards and expectations. “My stuff is kind of grungy and I say some really inappropriate things.” Musician C stated “I shove what I have to offer down peoples’ throats unapologetically... I don’t want to be fit into any mold.” I thought this was a very empowering way to approach being an artist: To say that no matter what people expect of her, they are going to get what she has to offer even if it doesn’t fit in with what other people are doing or with what is expected. Along with this question, Musician E brought up the issue of the fact that aside from performing she does also handle business aspects of booking shows and making connections. She said that while handling these aspects of the business she does conform more, but certainly not in the artistic aspects of her work.

Through the interviews I conducted with six non-classical female musical performers, I was able to gain massive amounts of insight into how these women view and conduct themselves within the realm of non-classical musical performance. While I did expect to receive answers that both varied for certain questions and seemed much more similar for others, I did not expect how different some of the answers would be from one another overall. I also thought it was interesting to see how much or how little these women were willing to give in their responses. I believe that had to do with multiple factors including the individual’s personality, how they viewed themselves as performers, and how they viewed their role in musical performance. It became very clear by the end of the interviews that it would be very hard to make large generalizations about female musicians as a whole solely through analyzing the information I obtained through my interviews. Instead, this process has cemented the importance of viewing each performer as an individual human being and not just a female performing musician.

Upon reflection of the process of this project as a whole, I have realized that certain things could have been improved upon but this is always the case. Having never undertaken a

project like this before, I do allow myself a little slack on this issue. One of my biggest regrets was not having all responses to the questions written. While only one of the interview participants opted to write out her responses instead of doing a phone interview, this gave the woman who chose this avenue more time to contemplate the questions posed instead of quickly being presented the information and responding off the cuff. All of the responses I received were well thought out and very helpful towards gaining insight on non-classical female musical performers. Upon reflection, I feel as though it may have been a disservice to the women I interviewed to not allow them to all have the time for contemplation of the questions posed, and giving written responses could have provided that time. Still, I am very grateful for the wonderful responses I received during these interviews.

The process of writing this paper to act as a companion to the interviews I conducted posed its own unique challenges. I wanted the women interviewed to be able to retain anonymity within the paper. This anonymity would allow for them to answer the questions I posed more freely without fear of backlash from those around them. I felt that this was especially important since, for some of these women, performance is their livelihood and jeopardizing that was not an option. I chose to assign each interview a letter and subsequently referred to them each as Musician(letter) in order to not have to refer to the women by name but still allow for people to be able to identify when responses came from the same woman.

The process of writing a paper on anonymous responses whilst trying to not make overarching generalizations about non-classical female musical performers was a challenge, pairing the new knowledge I obtained with preexisting information was also a unique challenge of its own. I hope that I was still able to do the topic of non-classical female performing musicians and their individuality justice through my research and interviews.

Kylie Johnston

Thesis Advisor: Jesse Clark

Honors Thesis

2 April 2018

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