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A Failure of the Music Industry: The Frustration of Women of Color

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A Failure of the Music Industry: The Frustration of Women of Color

By Christina Estes-Wynne

Women. The music industry has never treated them kindly. The industry wants them to look pretty and dress a certain way, to sing songs about love and nothing else. They want them to act a certain way and if they don't, it becomes much harder for their voices or their music to be heard. But what's more challenging is being a woman of color in an industry that puts more value on your white and male peers.

People of color in general have long been frustrated with how the industry perceives them. Audiences want their voice, the soul, the character, the emotion, but do not want the color of their skin. And if they do want their looks they have to look a certain way. People of color fought hard to get their fair share in the industry, many times unsuccessfully, even as white musicians and higher ups took qualities from the music people of color created and tried to claim it for themselves. For example, instrumentation that musicians of color have made popular will be slightly changed and then portrayed as an entirely new creation. These problems equate to people of color being unfairly treated by those in power in the music industry.

Being a woman in any profession comes with a fair share of problems. Most, if not all, businesses have a stereotypical role that they believe women should fit in to. And the majority of those roles revolve around positions that don't involve any significant decision making power. Aggravating this situation to a greater extent is the woman of color because she has to deal with the unequal treatment in the workforce that comes with being a woman, but also a person of color. Therefore, women of color have to fight much harder than white women to achieve success in the industry, and even harder than the men of color.

Until recent decades, it was rare to hear of a woman in a high position of power when it came to the business world, or even for women to have careers in fields that were considered male territory. For example, in author Tricia Rose's 1994 discussion of rap music and black culture in modern America, she says, "Young women were not especially welcome in male social spaces where technological knowledge is shared."ⁱ This implies that when women show interest in the more technology-based sides of the industry, they find themselves left out or unwelcomed by their male counterparts. The music industry also reflects such strong disparities. However, in the music industry it does not just stop at job positions, or number of people in the field, even though that is a major part of the problem. Women of color are very rarely seen in high level positions such as label heads, CEO's or studio owners. In fact when *Billboard* released its list of more than 100 powerful female executives in the music industry, only 20 of them were women of color.ⁱⁱ It is even harder to find them in the more technological side of the industry, a side that has always been and continues to be male-dominated. Even in the fields where they do achieve success, their achievements are often not acknowledged and their triumphs go unappreciated. Throughout the history of the music industry, women of color have not received the same recognition as their male counterparts because males have dominated the industry resulting in lack of female representation. Additionally, women have been oversexualized reducing their clout in their chosen music industry fields. Combined with the lack of acknowledgement for the few successful women in the industry, the result is that future generations of colored women are discouraged from attempting to reach their highest potential.

Male and White Domination of the Music Industry

Males have dominated all areas of the music industry for over a century, and even as time has passed there have only been small strides in integrating more women into the music business.

For example, in 2012 the percentage of female producers of over 600 popular songs was 2.4% but in 2017 it was down to 1.8%.ⁱⁱⁱ Most people believe that the music industry has a large number of women within it, mainly because the same few women are always talked about in the media, like Beyoncé, Rihanna, Taylor Swift and Ariana Grande. However, the reality is that there is a fraction of the number of women in the music business when compared to men. There are more male performers, producers, songwriters, studio engineers, and the list continues. Simply put, there are just a larger number of males in the music industry than there are females. For example, in a study by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, which studies inclusion issues within all sections of the entertainment industry, it was found that in 2017 out of the 651 music producers in the study, 2% of them were female^{iv}.

The reason for this disparity is because of how we view these roles in the music industry. Dr. Kate Pieper of the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative believes that it's all about the way we think: "Perceptions of leadership can influence who is considered for senior creative positions. Given the significance of the producer role, artists and executives may hold a cognitive bias of producers that pulls male."^v This means that people have a bias towards men as the best fit for roles such as producer, artist or executive in the music industry. This is significant because it is a reflection of not only how the leadership roles in the music industry are viewed, but how the leadership roles in all sectors of business are viewed as well. There are not enough women in the music industry because there are not enough women in the industry that have leadership positions that can act as role models.

This concept of male leaders is further emphasized in the yearly release of *Billboard's* "The Power 100," which is a comprehensive annual list of the most powerful people in the music industry as decided by a committee of *Billboard* editors and reporters. In 2018 only 17% of those

named on the list were women and the numbers get worse for people of color.^{vi} In the 2016 version of “The Power 100” less than 10% of people on the list were a person of color, according to the list from 2017 only two people on the entire list were women of color.^{vii} In 2018, even though there were more women on the list compared to the previous year, only three of them were women of color, none of which were in the top 20.

Numbers like this continue on into the creative side of the music business as well. Whether it be songwriters or performing artists, women tend to get the shorter end of the stick. In the same study by the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, they found that from 2012-2017, out of the 600 songs they studied, 12.3% of them were written by female songwriters and of the top nine female songwriters in the study, only three of them were women of color. Plus, the top nine male songwriters were responsible for 20% of the 600 songs in the study.^{viii} The same study found that in 2017, 83.2% of artists were men and 16.8% were women, with 2017 marking a six year low for females in pop music.

The creative sphere of the music industry is also the place where people of color find the most success. There are more artists and performers who are people of color that are successful than their white counterparts. In the same Annenberg Inclusion Initiative study the authors found that “approximately half of all artists in 2015, 2016 and 2017 were from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds”^{ix} This means that about 50% of all artists in 2015, 2016 and 2017 were people of color, or underrepresented. Of these underrepresented artists, only 20.6% of them were female, however in 2017 and 2016, fully half or more of these female artists were women of color. And the top underrepresented performers completely outperformed their white counterparts.^x

People of color are more successful when it comes to songwriting and performing for multiple reasons. The main reason is because of various qualities of music that most popular artists want to recreate, and these same qualities have proven to be the most successful since the modern music industry began. Audiences want the soulful sound of R&B and jazz, two well-known black dominated genres, the timbre that comes with a black singer's voice that heightens the emotional quality of the songs they sing, the lyrical poetry of rap music, but they want it all without the black culture and people that come with it. That is why it is easier to find people of color achieve greater success on the creative side of the music industry as compared to the business or technological side.

These different statistics are only a small reflection of the disparities that rage in the music industry, an in-depth reflection of how there are still strides to be made when it comes to inclusion. There are not many women of power in the industry, especially not women of color. Women in the music industry do just as much, if not more, work than their male counterparts. And claiming that women aren't doing a good enough job is degrading, condescending and not encouraging. Women have a hard time feeling they belong in this industry when all they get from their peers and higher ups is that they constantly need to do better. And in the music industry, even if they DO do better, there is still a strong chance that they won't be successful simply because they are women. It doesn't help that most men in the industry still continue to view women in this singular mold that does not place them in any positions of power, often leaving them to use their looks to try to get ahead.

Oversexualizing Black Women in Music Videos

Men in the music industry still see women, especially women of color, as something to fetishize and lust over, and it's most evident in the visual portrayals of them in music videos and

the lyrical content that describes them in songs. Women appear in these videos dressed in skimpy clothing, heavily made up, and dancing proactively, like Nicki Minaj's "Anaconda" music video.^{xi} Music videos present this idealized version of women of color, and when younger generations watch them they believe that is what they have to look like in order to catch and hold the attention of men.^{xii} When one looks at music videos, especially hip-hop or R&B music, it's very easy to tell how men perceive the women in those videos. Most often the women are barely clothed and dancing against each other or against the singer of the music, especially if the singer is male, like Drake's "Hotline Bling."^{xiii} In her research-based article about repressing black American woman in music videos, Professor Katy Khan said:

"Sexism and homophobia saturate hip-hop culture, and any deviation from these forms of bigotry is made marginal to its most dominant and lucrative expressions. Few artists dare to embody equality and respect between the sexes through their music; those who do have to fight to be heard above the dominant chorus of misogyny."^{xiv}

Professor Khan found that it was rare for respect between males and females to be seen in hip-hop culture, but even more rare when listening to hip-hop music. And the songs that do talk about equality between the genders have to compete harder against their competitors to be listened to by mainstream audiences. It has only been with the unapologetic and strong voices of female rappers like Cardi B ("Bodak Yellow"), Miss Eaves ("Thunder Thighs") and a little more distantly, Lauryn Hill ("Doo Wop (That Thing)") that these norms have been openly challenged.

How women act, dance, and dress in music videos are all things that can be perceived by younger generations as the way they feel they should behave. Another common theme Professor Khan found in American music videos is that:

"In male-produced music videos, black women have been portrayed as vixen, in sexist terms that conjure meanings of being identified as loose and dangerous. It is also ironic that in some female-produced music videos, women have portrayed themselves in ways

that perpetuate the images of themselves as objects, financially greedy and morally reprehensible”.^{xv}

This shows that even in music videos produced by women, the same misogynistic qualities run wild, and proves that it’s not just the people but the culture that needs a change of mind. One would think that music videos produced by women would have other women portrayed in a more positive light, but evidence shows the opposite. Female music video directors and artists portray women in music videos in the same stereotypical light that their male counterparts do.

Not all women portray their fellow females in such a manner. In Beyoncé’s video album *Lemonade*, she had fellow women of color in the various videos representing all skin tones and body shapes.^{xvi} But while Beyoncé is one major woman of color known for embracing her looks and all that it entails, she also does so in a way where those same traits are things she uses to sell her music. In a way, this is better because it gives women of color more ownership of themselves and allows them more freedom (hopefully) in how they allow themselves to be depicted. If women, especially women of color, put their foot down and demand respect of their bodies and their looks, it inspires other female artists to do the same.

Beyoncé has very successfully found a middle ground when it comes to black female expression in media and music. In an article about Hip-Hop culture, media, and Beyoncé, Crystal LaVoullé and Tisha Lewis Ellison state, “Representing a Black body ideal in *Lemonade*, Beyoncé uses images of Black women’s bodies to express empowerment, boldness, and resilience as Black women struggle to live in a racist and sexist society.”^{xvii} This means that LaVoullé and Ellison found that *Lemonade* showed a rarely seen empowerment of Black women in a society that consistently degrades them. These are the steps that women, especially women

of color, have to take, uplifting each other and finding ways to combat all the negativity surrounding being a woman of color.

The visual aspects of music videos and how they portray women of color has an even deeper meaning as well. Colorism is the prejudice or discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone, typically among people of the same ethnic or racial group. Hip-Hop as a visual medium plays a large part in the African American community, many women feel that the way women are portrayed in hip-hop videos is the way they have to look, act or dress in order to be noticed.^{xviii} Colorism in music videos is something specific to black women because the main portrayals in music videos are often of “light-skinned” women which makes darker skin girls feel as though they are considered unattractive as compared to their lighter skinned counter parts.^{xix}

It’s not just the visual aspect of music videos that show this oversexualization of women in this industry, but also the lyrical content of songs and the way they describe women. Hip-Hop as a genre is notorious for having lyrics that are highly misogynistic or degrading to women in one way or another. But even female rappers who make their names nationally known find ways to degrade their fellow women when it comes to their music. For example, in one of Cardi B’s most popular songs, “Bodak Yellow,” she says, “I don’t bother with these hoes/ Don’t let these hoes bother me/ They see pictures, they say “Goals”/ Bitch, I’m who they tryna be.” Just this one verse highlights women bringing down other women, implying that in order to be number one you have to step on other women to get them out of your way.

Similarly, Drake’s hit song “Hotline Bling,” includes the lyrics “Cause ever since I left the city, you/ Started wearing less and goin out more/...Used to stay at home, be a good girl.” These lyrics imply that without Drake’s “guidance” that the woman he was with started to degrade herself. These are the messages presented to young black women growing up, that they

have to have a man to guide them and teach them how to act right and that in order to be on top they have to claw over other women to get there. With ideals like these constantly presented, young women are discouraged from feeling comfortable in their own skin.

Unacknowledged Success and Future Generations

Award shows play a significant role in the music industry. The Grammy Awards are one of the most important award shows in the music industry, mainly because the awards are decided by other people in the industry, not by the common people.^{xx} This makes receiving a Grammy an acknowledgement of success awarded by peers in your own industry. Yet, the Grammy's are known for having controversy surrounding diversity with respect to both Grammy nominations and winners.^{xxi} And there's very solid reasoning upon which such controversy is based.

In 2018, 8% of Grammy nominations were women and in 2013, 7.9% of the Grammy nominations were women.^{xxii} That's only a .1% increase within five years. In the category of non-classical Producer of the Year, not a single female has been nominated in the past six years, and 100% of the winners have been male.^{xxiii} This statistic alone shows a major issue within the music industry with a lack of encouragement towards female producers. No female, let alone a woman of color, has won the non-classical Producer of the Year award, but considering only 2% of producers are female, is it that surprising? And for one of the four biggest awards that are given out during the Grammy's, Album of the Year, from 2013-2018 only 6.1% of the nominees, not even the winners, were female.^{xxiv}

Male domination in the technical fields within the music business is similar to how some people feel about women entering the sciences--that the women don't belong there.^{xxv} Since there is such a small fraction of women in the engineering, production or sound side of the

industry, there is little to no encouragement for new generations of women to enter those same fields. Younger women don't have role models to look up to that will encourage them to keep reaching for their goals of being a producer or a studio engineer, and sometimes they will even be completely discouraged from trying. And with women rarely being nominated for a Grammy in technical fields, there's even less encouragement for women to enter these fields.

However, it's not just the music industry that is having these types of problems when it comes to industry peer recognition and award shows. 80% of Oscar-winning movies had a male actor as the lead^{xxvi} and from 1928 – 2015, 1.1% of “Best Actress” Oscar winners were women of color, with that 1.1% being Halle Berry winning “Best Actress” in 2002^{xxvii}. The fact that in one of the nation's other biggest entertainment industries, only one woman of color has won the biggest award a female actress can receive, is equally astonishing and sad. However, for the Tony Awards from 1982 – 2015, 15% of the “Best Actress in a Play” winners were women of color with women of color making up 27% of “Best Actress in a Musical” winners. This could be because women of color found a better reception on stage than they did in either the film and music sector. Sure, there's been strides to be more inclusive in the film (and music) industries, but the same people in film and music have not acknowledged the success that these women have achieved.

Encouraging future generations to enter the arts is a crucial factor to keeping the entertainment industries alive and thriving. Without the encouragement and guidance of older generations in these industries, there's a good chance that younger generations will repeat mistakes or to be completely discouraged from entering in the first place because they feel that they have no place there. That's why it is important that women now take a stance by providing proud examples of various body images, not letting themselves be unheard in conversations, and

writing and performing music about what it means to be a strong woman, such as in Beyoncé's song, "Formation."^{xxviii} But this message goes beyond just women as well, beyond where women are making songs and sending out vibes about being confident in yourself and your body image as a human being. It takes the men, who currently have the real power in the music industry, standing up and recognizing that there is an issue that needs to be rectified.

Males have begun to notice that there is a problem in the industry and have slowly begun voicing their opinions on this issue. In an attempt to get a response about the lack of diversity and barriers women face from male musicians, the alternative music publication *AltPress* sent out a request for comments from male musicians and got 13 responses. Here's what some of them said:

"Young women should be encouraged to make music and art and to take it as far as they can. There's a perspective that rock music is a 'man's world,' and that could be off-putting to young women looking to enter the industry—and that needs to change."

"We've had problems in the past with certain venues and security teams not allowing women who work with us backstage or into the pit, even if they had the correct passes, because they were women. It isn't exclusively a problem for female musicians, either—a lot of the women we know who work behind the scenes often feel they aren't taken seriously."

"It would be great to stop hearing things like, 'For a woman, she's a really good manager.' There should be no surprise in seeing a successful businesswoman in the music industry or a singer that's appreciated for being a great singer and not because she's good looking."^{xxix}

The first quote implied that women are hesitant to enter a very male-dominated section of the industry which is definitely something that needs to change. The second quote talks about women facing problems even when they have earned the right status simply because they are women, whether they be artists or behind the stage staff. The third quote is something that

women probably hear all over the industry, with the precursor “For a woman, she’s...” as if being a woman implies that they are lesser within their field. Statements such as these need to be heard by everyone in the music industry, not just women. If men see other men stepping up and calling out sexism, it gives them the courage to do so later when they themselves see it happening. And that’s exactly what the music industry needs.

Why is this important?

Equality and fair representation is something that America as a country is always striving for, but never quite reaches. As a country, we have made tremendous progress toward diverse representation in various media, but there is still so much more work to be done. The statistics that show the great disparity in the number of women in various fields or the number of women who have won awards for their music demonstrate that the music industry as a whole is failing not only women, but in even greater proportion, women of color. Women should not have to conform to whatever the male-dominated mindset of the industry wants them to look or act like, they should not have to force their way into leadership positions in order for their ideas to be taken seriously, and they should not have their achievements go unnoticed.

Steps have been taken by some industry leaders to take action to address these disparities, but the real problems lie with the people in the industry that think nothing is wrong. They are the ones that must be convinced that there is a serious problem in the industry and that something should be done about it because if their minds can be changed, there is hope that the industry as a whole will take notice and change. The music industry has a chance to change its views, it just needs more help in order to do so. And that is where similarly-minded females and males should come together to create a more equal and inclusive music industry.

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