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## “The Personal is Political”: The Power of Female Voices in 1970s Pop Music and Beyond

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## **"The Personal is Political": The Power of Female Voices in 1970s Pop Music and Beyond**

By Jennifer Morrow

In 1971, Carole King's album *Tapestry* was the best-selling album on the Billboard charts for fifteen consecutive weeks, the longest run for a female soloist at the time. Today, it is considered one of the most important albums of all-time and remains one of the best-selling.<sup>1</sup> *Tapestry's* success was monumental for many reasons, but the cultural impact of a female artist dominating the charts at such an unprecedented rate cannot be understated. King was no stranger to the music industry when *Tapestry* took over the pop music charts in the early seventies, as she had already penned numerous hits as a Brill Building songwriter, but it was one of her first projects written distinctly from her own perspective-- and literally performed with her own voice. In this way, Carole King was part of a larger movement happening in pop music in the late sixties and early seventies: the emergence of the singer-songwriter.

While musically resembling folk artists who wrote protest songs in the early sixties, soft rock singer-composers were concerned with the personal, so much so that many artists' work became known as "confessional pop." This mode of songwriting especially appealed to women, who embraced the genre as a medium for unfiltered, distinctly female self-expression. While soft rock was not explicitly political, artists like Carole King, Joni Mitchell, and Carly Simon offered a crucial point-of-view throughout the cultural shifts of the 1960s and 70s, as the women's liberation movement challenged societal views on traditional gender roles. Female singer-songwriter music was political because it established women's personal lives as universally

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relevant and worthy of public discussion, and therefore set the precedent for female autoethnography within popular music that we still see today.

### What is Autoethnography?

To define and contextualize the cultural significance of female singer-songwriters in soft rock, this essay will use the term “autoethnography” to navigate the ways in which confessional music connects to larger discourses within society— in this case, the feminist conversations that emerged out of the women’s liberation movement. According to music literature researchers Carolyn Ellis and Brydie-Leigh Bartleet, “Autoethnography is an autobiographical genre that connects the personal to the cultural, social, and political. Projects in this genre are distinctly characterized by a focus on intimate involvement, engagement, and embodied participation in the subject matter one is exploring.”<sup>2</sup> Within popular music, autoethnographic songs are typically told through first-person narration and detail true stories from the writer’s personal life. However, while the music deals with personal, introspective themes, it directly connects the autobiographical narrative to a larger network of shared cultural experiences.

It can be difficult to characterize a song or movement of music as autoethnographic due to the complexity and ambiguity of the genre. This is due to the fact that autoethnography is largely focused on interpretation, which by definition is subjective. The artist may have difficulty communicating their life experiences in a musical context, and there may be a disconnect between the artist’s intentions and public perception. Additionally, when autoethnography is used within music, there is added complication of balancing musical communication and lyrical communication. As Bartleet and Ellis argue, “Musicians and autoethnographers grapple with the

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challenges of communicating and writing about their lived experiences. As these experiences are always dynamic, relational, embodied and highly subjective, they are difficult to express, particularly from a musical perspective where words are not the primary form of communication”<sup>3</sup>

However, despite the limitations of discussing autoethnography in music, understanding the genre’s function is necessary to analyzing female singer-songwriters of the early 1970s because it offers a framework and vocabulary to understanding how confessional writing can be understood as social commentary-- and have a cultural impact. Female singer-songwriter music must be discussed in relation to the context of the cultural and musical moments it was created in: the beginnings of the women’s liberation movement and the fragmentation of popular music, resulting in the emergence of “soft rock.”<sup>4</sup> Through utilizing songwriting as a tool for introspection and self-reflection, female soft-rock singer-songwriters not only practiced the virtues of female empowerment that were circulating at the time on a personal level, but participated in a cultural conversation by mirroring sentiments and attitudes shared by a growing collective of women in the 1970s.

Additionally, the term autoethnography steers conversations surrounding female singer-songwriters’ craft away from the often limiting and sexist label of “confessional singer.” Joni Mitchell notoriously despised the title, calling it “as close as someone could come” to calling her the n-word.<sup>5</sup> The negative connotations surrounding the word “confessional” lead to a sense of shame that is attributed almost exclusively to female artists, As Alexandria Pollard wrote in an article discussing confessional music for *The Guardian*, “...why has a word that once applied to a

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specific literary genre become so reductive and heavily gendered when applied to music? And why do we consider a term that in any other context, be it legal or religious, is imbued with a sense of guilt and shame, to be specifically female?”<sup>6</sup> By replacing the term “confession” with autoethnography, female singer-songwriter music is not only opened up to become a discussion of the personal as well as the political, but is celebrated as a work of female empowerment instead of a public shaming of women who “overshare.”

Autoethnography remains an important aspect of female pop music today, albeit in a slightly different context. Today’s female pop stars exist in a much different political and social climate than female singer-songwriters of the 1970s, which changes the nature of national discourse surrounding women’s rights— and, consequently, the narratives threaded within autoethnographical pop music. However, as the #MeToo movement has proven, discussions of how women are allowed to exist in public spaces, including how they are allowed to publicly portray themselves, are certainly not over, and this national discourse has been mirrored by female pop music. When Lizzo performed her hit singles “Truth Hurts” and “Good as Hell” at the 2019 VMA’s, she opened her set with the lines “Why are men great ‘til they gotta be great,” pausing as the audience erupted in applause, hinting that the societal impact of Lizzo’s light-hearted brand of breakup songs and feel good pop is about much more than her personal experiences, but the current trend of women unapologetically embracing and portraying their authentic selves.<sup>7</sup>

In this way, the lasting power of female artists controlling their own narratives--and how audiences respond to this vehicle of empowerment-- is palpable, proving that the “confessional

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pop" of the 1970s was much more than mere sensationalism, but an autoethnographical practice that continues to inspire female musicians throughout generations.

### From Early Rock Misogyny to Women's Liberation

Before artists like Joni Mitchell and Carole King broke out of the singer-songwriter movement in the late sixties-early seventies, rock music--a predominantly male genre--was the main focal point of the popular music industry. While rock music made strides by reconciling differences in race, socioeconomic backgrounds, and age, the genre excluded women almost entirely. Within rock lyrical conventions, women lacked a voice and were sung about by men with stereotypical terminology, such as the dominatrix, the earth mother, or the submissive sexual object.<sup>8</sup>

However, the early 1960s also marked the arrival of girl groups— mostly black female vocal groups— that emerged from the Brill Building era of the music industry.<sup>9</sup> While this era still predated the practice of musicians mostly writing their own music, the impact of female groups having such a visible impact on the pop music charts cannot be understated, and arguably laid the foundation for the emergence and success of female singer-songwriters later in the decade. As stated in the introduction, Carole King herself emerged out of Brill Building pop as a successful songwriter, working on hit songs like "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman" and "You've Got a Friend."<sup>10</sup> However, King's success was not easily acquired, as Mary E. Rohlving notes in her feminist cultural analysis of the Brill Building era:

Her method was eloquent: She would comb the city's phone directories to find the addresses of publishers and record companies, visiting as many as possible before their offices closed for the day. The secretaries, King recalls, were pleasant and encouraging,

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but insisted that she leave a tape, which she did not have. Because the publishers and producers were often too busy to stop what they were doing and listen to an unknown, teenage girl, King was forced to keep going back. Her break came in 1958, when an exhausted secretarial gatekeeper asked her boss what to do with the 16-year-old girl who kept reappearing at their office. Don Costa of ABC-Paramount Records response was finally to let her in.<sup>11</sup>

The teenage King refused to take no for an answer, advocating for herself and musical talents—a theme that would continue to define her career as one of the defining pop artists of the late twentieth century. However, while girl groups and female Brill Building songwriters contributed to dismantling the male-dominated nature of rock ‘n’ roll, the music itself was heavily manufactured for wide consumer appeal and mostly lacks progressive lyrical content. It was not until the later 1960s that national attitudes regarding female sexuality, gender roles, and empowerment began to shift significantly— with the birth of the women’s liberation movement.

The women’s movement emerged from other civil rights movements of the 1950s and 60s, expanding the fight for equality and freedom from oppression to women through protests, advocacy, women’s liberation groups, and the birth of feminist theory. Feminist ideals manifested in society through shifting cultural attitudes in all spheres of life. More women felt empowered to pursue a career and make their own life decisions outside of societal pressure to marry, have children, and become a homemaker. These changes were aided by the invention of the contraceptive pill in 1960, which allowed women to have agency over their bodies and their reproductive choices. Women in the United States also organized through groups like the National Organization of Women (NOW) and ERAmerica to push equal rights legislation through congress, such as the Equal Rights Amendment.<sup>12</sup>

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While progress throughout the second wave of feminism was slow and hard-fought, the women's liberation movement succeeded in encouraging women to demand their place at the table and dignity as capable members of society. The 1970s marked a period of time in which American society was shifting to a culture in which women's voices were sought after and increasingly valued by the public's consciousness, making the singer-songwriter movement the perfect outlet for female voices to be amplified and heard.

### Female Voices Triumph

While singer-songwriters existed long before the 1970s, the term-- and genre associated with said term-- emerged in the late sixties. Alongside Carole King, Joni Mitchell was another early pioneer in the movement, largely influential in establishing confessional writing as a key component of the genre through her 1971 album, *Blue*. Mitchell quintessentially embodied the singer-songwriter movement through her layered emotional themes, acoustic sound, and unapologetically personal, introspective lyrics. Speaking of Mitchell and James Taylor comparatively in his essay: "The Emergence of the Singer-Songwriter," David R. Sumway wrote: "The lyrics establish a sense of direct address and autobiographical reference by using more or less conversational language, including specific details of time or place... 'A Case of You' and 'The Last Time I Saw Richard' include accounts of particular caverns. These latter two songs also include fragments of conversations, giving them a documentary character."<sup>13</sup>

Mitchell was sometimes criticized for how public she made her emotional baggage within her music--some critics refused to credit her artistry due to its diary-like nature. In "Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the USA," Garfalo and Waksman suggest that Mitchell herself is partially to

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blame for these attitudes because of her unbridled honesty within her lyrics: “(Mitchell’s) romantic involvements...were more widely noted than her music and frequently submerged consideration of her artistry. Mitchell bore some responsibility for the situation because she devoted much of her considerable talent-- a near three-octave range, intricate melodies and instrumentation, and elegant lyrics-- to exploring the exquisite pain of her amorous ups and downs.”<sup>14</sup>

However, Mitchell’s very dedication to exploring and defining these “ups and downs” are what make her work so radical and important, especially within the context of the women’s liberation movement and national conversations of the time. According to Sumway in his book *Rockstar*, “Mitchell’s songs illustrate the notion that the personal is political by the way in which they deal with the power dynamics of intimate relationships.”<sup>15</sup> In this way, Mitchell’s writing mirrored the goals of the women’s movement: to bring the personal into the public consciousness in order to confront gender issues. The women’s liberation movement itself can be seen as a “confessional” practice, as women were encouraged to voice their own beliefs, struggles, and the issues that affected their lives.

Due to the deeply autobiographical nature of her songwriting, Joni Mitchell’s work is not an explicit example of autoethnography. However, her dedication and devotion to exploring her own sense of self resonated with female listeners in the midst of the women’s movement, who were also navigating their identity and exploring new ideas related to expressing female sexuality and challenging gender roles within relationships. In her most famous ballad, “A Case of You,” Mitchell writes beyond the traditional framework of a love song, instead dedicating

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lyrics entirely to exploring her emotions and identity within the context of her romantic relationship:

Oh, I am a lonely painter  
I live in a box of paints  
I'm frightened by the devil  
And I'm drawn to those ones that ain't afraid.<sup>16</sup>

Instead of simply singing to a lover about her desire, Mitchell contextualizes and analyzes her own attraction, subverting traditional gender roles within music of female desire being manufactured for a male audience. Mitchell writes first and foremost for herself, which was a radical notion for a female songwriter at the time. Despite criticism, Mitchell's success spoke for itself, proving that women writing music from a female perspective-- for a largely female audience—was marketable and made an impact on listeners.

While Mitchell's writing was largely focused on introspection and personal narrative, artists like Carly Simon combined the personal and the political more directly. In her song "That's the Way I've Always Heard it Should Be," Simon sings in the chorus:

But you say it's time we moved in together  
And raised a family of our own, you and me  
Well, that's the way I've always heard it should be  
You want to marry me, we'll marry<sup>17</sup>

In addressing her lover, Simon brings the listener in through her personal narrative, but opens up the discussion half-way through the chorus with the line "Well, that's the way I've always heard it should be." Simon is addressing the systemic problem of women's lives being dictated for them and only being understood through their roles as wives and mothers. She not only discusses

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her personal aversion to marriage, but reflects on her college friends' troubled relationships: "The couples cling and claw/ And drown in love's debris."<sup>18</sup> However, the song ends with a return to the personal, in which Simon confesses her fear that she will become trapped in marriage and lose her individuality and agency: "But soon you'll cage me on your shelf/I'll never learn to be just me first/By myself."<sup>19</sup>

Simon's songwriting was also radical in how it mirrored changing national perspectives on sexuality and marriage—especially for women. According to Judy Kutulas, "The Carly Simon principle was most compelling in the way that it altered the romantic narrative in popular music. Singer-songwriters rewrote the formulaic love story, one that predicated on the idea of soul mates who realized their natural attraction only in the last act or verse."<sup>20</sup> Contrastingly, Simon explored sexuality throughout a relationship without marriage as the end goal, or the happily-ever-after. In this way, Simon also succeeded in portraying a more honest representation of modern American society, reflecting the sexual politics and societal upheaval of the 1970s.

### **Marketing the Movement (and Beyond)**

While it can certainly be argued that the social commentary that existed within female singer-songwriters' music had an impact on the women's liberation movement, it is certain that the women's liberation movement had an impact on the rise of popularity in women's music within the music industry. The shift to progressive cultural attitudes on women's rights created a market for music that correlated with this societal "trend," resulting in promotion of artists like Simon, Mitchell, and King. As Lynn Van Matre discussed in her contemporary *Chicago Tribune* article: "Singing-Songwriters: 1971 is Woman's World":

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“Tying the mounting interest in the species to the current equally strong interest in Women’s Lib, especially among younger women, seems an obvious connection, tho an over-simplified one. The Women’s Lib interest has played a big part, certainly. The recording industry makes it its business to keep up with the trends that can make the cash register sing as the records spin ‘round. And the industry now is discovering that for some reason--Women’s Lib, whatever-- the old belief that Cash Box magazine, in an article on the burgeoning female singer sales, terms the “girls don’t sell” credo doesn’t go anymore.”<sup>21</sup>

Although Van Matre’s analysis is somewhat bleak and written sardonically, she later adds that she hopes that her current moment will “give way to a situation where women’s equal prominence is accepted as a natural thing, not a fad or a ‘trend.’” In many ways, this statement was prophetic. In today’s music industry, artists like Lizzo have shown that women writing confessional pop music is the norm, not the exception. This rise of women in the spotlight boldly sharing personal experiences stems directly from female singer-songwriters who paved the way in the early 1970s.

However, while the diversifying of popular music in the seventies allowed for women to have an increased voice within the music industry, as well as a platform to voice societal issues, there are still major gender discrepancies within the music industry today. Despite the increase of female pop stars topping the charts, like Rihanna, Beyoncé, Taylor Swift, Lady Gaga, Ariana Grande, and so many more, women are still routinely excluded from music awards, and there are still far fewer female songwriters and producers than men. For example, researchers from USC Annenberg reported in 2018 that only 9.3% of Grammy nominees from 2013-2018 were female.

<sup>22</sup> In many ways, these trends are a reflection of the societal issues that led to the creation of the

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#MeToo movement, which created a space for women to share in a collective conversation about how women are still misrepresented, excluded, and discriminated against in today's society.

For this reason, autoethnography has remained an important aspect of female popular music. However, today this philosophy goes beyond the music, carrying over into female artists' branding, music videos, political advocacy, and more. Additionally, modern conversations about the intersections of race, sexuality, and gender have widened autoethnographical work for further inclusion. Artists like Beyoncé and Lizzo have incorporated their personal narratives into their music as gateways to larger conversations about race, gender, body positivity, and female empowerment. Taylor Swift has become increasingly political in her music and public image, speaking out against discrimination against women and the LGBTQ community. Hayley Kiyoko unapologetically declares her sexuality in her music and videos, promoting self-love and acceptance for the LGBT individuals.

While there is still progress to be made for true gender equality within the music industry, today's female artists have an increased dedication to honesty, introspection, and empowerment within their music. The foundation laid by artists like Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon, and Carole King has established the market demand and societal need for authentic female voices, and their voices have inspired generations of women to have the courage to define their own identity, speak out, and demand their place at the table.

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