

**Girl Music of the Indie Rock Persuasion:  
Amplifying Indie Through 2000s Girl Culture**

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## Abstract

The 2000s, a decade that is often considered lacking in defining culture or trends, represents a key period for the distillation of ideas about authenticity and access in North American music cultures. A liminal space between analogue distribution practices and the ubiquity of streaming services, the 2000s saw a turn towards television, film, and early internet cultures as the primary spaces of tastemaking and musical discovery. These unconventional sites challenged existing hierarchies and modes of gatekeeping that reproduced particular music genres, and rock music in particular, as the domain of straight, white masculinities. This interdisciplinary research explores the various facets of this cultural mainstreaming, excavating the central role of women, girls, and girl culture in this shift. I draw on qualitative research interviews conducted with female music supervisors, bloggers, and DJs to bolster this analysis of cultural intermediaries; each chapter of the dissertation also focuses on a different cultural site. In the first chapter, I place existing work on indie music cultures in conversation with girls' studies scholarship on bedroom cultures to argue that an indie rock rhetoric of retreat and marginalization lacks a feminist citational politics. In the second chapter, I explore the shifting role of music supervisors as tastemakers and provide a critique of 'fanboy auteur' narratives. In the third chapter, I explore films released as indie crossover hits during the 2000s, connecting indie music and indie film theory but also arguing that, with more distance from the moment of indie rock's initial cultural mainstreaming, cultural producers could camp its gender politics. In the fourth chapter, I explore girls' music blogs from a particular music scene (New York City) as resistive sites where the exclusionary legacies of rock music criticism were challenged. In the fifth and final chapter, I explore how the 2000s also expanded physical music scenes into digital space with the meteoric rise of MP3 and file-sharing technologies that offered an important challenge to masculinist music cultures. This dissertation demonstrates that a wider cultural aversion to feminized cultural texts and practices flattens the stories we tell about 2000s indie rock — and the legacies it left behind.

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There's a popular saying in music that goes, "You have your whole life to write your first album, and six months to write your second." I don't think the rock magazines of the 1960s where this saying originated had any kind of insight into the glacial timelines of academic publishing — in six months, you're lucky if you hear back from peer review. But it's certainly true that this dissertation feels like the culmination of almost thirty years of living, which means that there are an awful lot of people to thank.

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An uninterrogated past in music isn't worth the nostalgia.

— *Hanif Abdurraqib*

## Introduction

### INTRO

In a brief but insightful editor's note heralding *Pitchfork's* twenty-fifth anniversary in October 2021, editor-in-chief Puja Patel writes candidly about the ways that the online music publication provided a musical education. The child of immigrant parents, Patel often felt out of place among high school friends and their easy fluency in North American rock and pop music. "Downloading classic albums [was] a tedious exercise that felt crucial to my belonging in a rural-suburban, primarily white town," notes Patel. Later, *Pitchfork* became a kind of musical divining rod: "In [*Pitchfork*], I saw the value of discovery, of irreverence, of wanting to find the Next Big Thing before everyone else, of having a dissenting opinion just because it was my own. I felt *Pitchfork's* closeness to music that was on the fringes and its wariness of the mainstream." Patel would go on to read the online publication ravidly and now, more than fifteen years into her career as a music journalist, she's at the helm of the very publication that shaped her sense of belonging and music taste all those years ago.

Music has always had the power to inspire belonging, provide common ground, and bridge differences between vastly different experiences. It also has the power to shape cultural hierarchies, preclude a sense of belonging, and animate differences. In her discussion of *Pitchfork's* dynamic history, Patel frames her engagement with alternative and independent music as a choice that helped provide a sense of self and cultural identity, even as she navigated young adulthood as a first generation American. In honing a particular type of musical expertise, Patel moved away from other kinds of listenership and fandom — namely, that of the mainstream and what Susan Cook (2001) has coined the "abject popular" — and towards the frequently gatekept and notably white, middle class, and definitively male-dominated world of



independent (or ‘indie’) music.<sup>1</sup> The popular has traditionally and historically been aligned with more feminized audiences; by extension, popular culture has been framed as shallow, insipid, and even dangerous (see Coates 2002, Wald 2001). Tastemaking channels are hardly immune to these assumptions — a key aspect of *Pitchfork*’s twenty-fifth anniversary content was a reranking of albums that deserved a second look, along with the tongue-in-cheek advice that one should always be open to revising one’s musical opinions “based on context, culture, who we’ve become, who we once were.”<sup>2</sup> Due to a combination of economic, technological, and cultural factors, the 2000s were a decade when alternative and independent music intersected more and more with mainstream, popular, and often feminized culture. As these distinctions got fuzzier, independent music made its way onto popular television and film soundtracks, vinyl and CDs gave way to easily-downloadable MP3 files, and the purportedly sturdy boundaries of the male-dominated music press began to erode. Everywhere, the line between valorized alternative music cultures and the abjectness of the mainstream was starting to falter and — while much has been written about the cultural mainstreaming of 2000s indie music with regards to industry histories and technology — little scholarly research exists on the particular role that women, girls, and girl culture played in this shift.

This dissertation responds to this gap in existing academic accounts of 2000s indie music, and indie rock in particular.<sup>3</sup> Frances Ray White (2006) deploys the term “indie public” to

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<sup>1</sup> That Patel has since become editor-in-chief of a major tastemaking publication is perhaps our first clue that the hegemony of indie music has been notably shaken; however, as this dissertation explores, an influx of female cultural intermediaries has not yet directly translated into meaningful change in other areas of these same spaces.

<sup>2</sup> Some of the albums that *Pitchfork* ranked higher in this revisionist history include work by Rilo Kiley, Liz Phair, and Regina Spektor released during the 2000s. *Pitchfork*’s shifting attitude towards female artists is also highlighted in their mid-2019 rush to rank all of Taylor Swift’s early albums, which the outlet had up until that point summarily ignored (they did, however, review Ryan Adam’s cover of Swift’s *1989*).

<sup>3</sup> Much of the existing scholarship on indie centers on British indie rock and earlier (1980s and ‘90s) indie cultures (see Hesmondhalgh 1999, Fonarow 2006, and Spielmann et al. 2020). Comparatively little addresses this era of cultural mainstreaming focused in North American popular cultures and — I argue — concentrated in particular in the feminized film, television, and internet cultures of the time.

describe those spaces where indie music is created, consumed, discussed, and evaluated; it is in these cultural sites *around* indie rock itself where this project grounds itself. By addressing the various sites of indie rock's mainstreaming, from soundtracks to teen film to early music blogs, this research engages with 2000s indie and understands its infiltration into the mainstream, not as a catastrophe or an ending, but a rare moment in music history where the gendered dimensions of cultural debates around legitimacy and authenticity, mediated and coded through particular ('indie') genres of music and music fandom, became especially obvious. The inclusion of indie rock in feminized media franchises and girls' cultural spaces can be framed as legitimizing or elevating otherwise irredeemable 'girly' media. It can also be understood as a savvy move by music workers to simultaneously ensure the future of indie music in an increasingly hostile music industry and invite an entirely new demographic of fans into previously gatekept music genres. This dissertation calls for intervention into narratives that cast the 2000s as a time of cultural contagion, arguing instead for the joy and possibility in reframing this era as a time of shifting benchmarks around what counts as 'good' art, musicianship, access, authenticity, and fandom. Specifically, it excavates the vital role that girls — as cultural intermediaries, accidental audiences, and fans — have played in shaping the boundaries of what counts as 'cool' and who is granted access to what Sarah Thornton (1995) calls "subcultural capital." How can we reconcile the innate and deeply human want to chase a sense of belonging via music with the stubbornly patriarchal logics of an indie rock scene with no intention of loving you back? This dissertation is my attempt at an answer.

### ***Feminist Cultural Studies***

This dissertation deliberately borrows from a broad range of disciplines: popular music studies, girls studies, feminist theory, cultural studies, fan studies, and new media studies. My

theoretical frameworks are intentionally interdisciplinary, but always rooted in the feminist cultural studies conviction that culture can be both messy and important. As sociologist Suzanna Danuta Walters writes in her book *Material Girls: Making Sense of Feminist Cultural Theory*, feminist cultural studies is equivalent to a kind of “feminist contextualism” (1995, 4). “We cannot simply ‘read’ [events] as discrete texts of culture,” writes Walters. “The meanings of these narratives exist not only in the actual narrative moment of cultural articulation, but in the vast and complex circuit of articulations that both precede and follow the localized event” (1995, 14). Because of this, there is a fair amount of temporal ‘slip’ in this writing; I provide historical context for the cultural sites that focus each chapter and make connections to contemporary examples when it makes sense to do so. Music is always already full of these threads of connection; Simon Frith (2007) argues that managing time and memory is one of the four primary functions of popular music.<sup>4</sup> “One of the most obvious consequences of music’s organization of our sense of time,” he writes, “is that songs and tunes are often the key to our remembrance of things past” (266). Songs unfold in time, are organized through time, and “offer listeners unique relations to feelings of time” (Jennex 2016, 89). In this way, approaching a project like this with anything but an interdisciplinary and expansive theoretical framework would not be doing justice to the intertextual, vibrant, temporally messy nature of the research questions themselves.

The development of feminist cultural studies is similarly nonlinear. In excavating the overlap of feminist theory and cultural studies, Sue Thornham (2000) has noted that most accounts of cultural studies histories date the ‘arrival’ of feminism in cultural studies to the work of feminist scholars in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Popular music’ here does not refer only to pop, but encompasses all popular styles of music (as opposed to art or folk musics) from rock to dance to country to R&B.

University. But even this story has its thorns. Thornham quotes Stuart Hall (1992, cited in Thornham 2000, 2), a central figure of the CCCS:

We know it was [accomplished], but it's not generally known how and where feminism first broke in. I use the metaphor deliberately. As the thief in the night, it broke in; interrupted, made an unseemly noise, seized the time, crapped on the table of cultural studies.

The language of this quote underscores the degree to which, even in the context of one of the most feminist-leaning hotbeds of modern cultural studies, feminism was still seen as an interloper. Black feminism also 'broke in' during the early 1990s, most notably in the work of bell hooks, whose writing on popular culture, the oppositional gaze, and race was frequently in direct dialogue with Hall and other CCCS scholars (hooks 1992, 1995, 1999). "Black women involve ourselves in a process whereby we see our history as counter-memory," wrote hooks (1992) of the oppositional gaze. This Black feminist counter-memory privileges alternative ways of knowing and — among other noteworthy goals — resists the impulse to smooth over the story of cultural studies and frame its feminist dimensions as something that emerged fully formed and without contestation.

Rather than understanding feminism as an additive to the masculinist mainstream, notes Thornham, it is possible to reframe these narratives and think of feminist writers and thinkers as conducting cultural studies well before its legitimation as an academic field, in keeping with Teresa de Lauretis' contention that feminist theory is a "theory of gender oppression in culture" (in Thornham 2000, 5). Kathleen Weiler (2001) argues a similar point in *Feminist Engagements: Reading, Resisting, and Revisioning Male Theorists in Education and Cultural Studies*, where each chapter takes up the work of a foundational male theorist and offers commentary on the usefulness of his work to feminist cultural studies writ large. The book title references 'engagements' rather than the obviously preferable 'exchanges,' Weiler notes, due to the fact

that “the feminist use of the work of male theorists who have historically ignored our own work contains profound contradictions” (2001, 2). In other words, feminist cultural studies has always been at work in, around, and adjacent to more mainstream practices of cultural studies; it is via the narrow histories we tell about the discipline, along with its flawed citational practices, that we understand feminist cultural studies as existing only once it had been folded into Cultural Studies proper. This impulse to reify disciplinary boundaries has persisted in modern cultural studies; Catherine Driscoll and Melissa Gregg, writing on the academic ‘discovery’ of fan studies in the 1990s, note how “the gendered expertise of [fans] is transformed by ‘convergence culture’ into a kind of added value” (2011, 572). Subculture has long been a tool of cultural studies for talking about interaction between “rhetorics of presence and community,” note Driscoll and Gregg, but the field also has a history of trading “on proximity to what is hip, cool and emergent beneath the radar of mainstream political and popular culture” (2011, 567-572). Early waves of fan studies in the ‘90s followed a wider pattern in cultural studies of presenting previously unstudied cultural spaces (like the internet) as subcultural — my discussion of feminist fan studies methodologies, below, explores in detail the ways in which this narrative continues to limit the scope of cultural studies. Feminist critiques of masculinist disciplines that trade on the novelty of discovery and subculture are integral to this project’s questions of authenticity in cultural spaces (and also, vitally, connected to ongoing conversations about the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of the university as a whole). Recognizing the blurred boundaries between the fields that constitute this research has allowed me to appreciate the longer trajectory of these questions, and the ways that provocations around audience and belonging have bled from feminist theory into cultural studies into fan studies into new media studies in a way that defies neat categorization.

## *Girls Studies*

One field in particular that has adopted this kind of feminist cultural sensibility, and that serves as an important framework for this work, is girls studies. Emerging in the 1990s at the intersection of gender studies and cultural studies, girls studies is an interdisciplinary “assemblage of social and cultural issues and questions” (Driscoll 2008, 14) that has already seen significant amounts of change and reshaping in its relatively short time as a distinct academic discipline.<sup>5</sup> The usefulness of a girls studies framework for my research comes from the field’s longstanding entanglements with questions of cultural legitimacy and the consumer/producer binary, a foundational aspect of girls studies that stretches back to Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber’s writing on bedroom cultures. Today, the girl is a figure created by a set of discourses, “not meant simply as an age but as an allegorical state” (Grant and Waxman 2011, 2). The bounds of what we understand as ‘girl culture’ are always shifting; younger children now have earlier access to the materials and media of teen girl culture, while older individuals might extend their engagement with girl and youth culture into adulthood and beyond (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2007, xxvi).<sup>6</sup> In the introduction to *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia*, scholars Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh describe a number of different aspects of girl culture, including social practices, material culture, media, space, people, and social relations that are practiced by, produced for, consumed by, and associated with girls and girlhood (2007, xxvi-xxviii). All of these dimensions of girl culture appear in this research and — in many ways — the multidimensional sites that Mitchell and Reid-Walsh imagine as encompassing girl culture

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<sup>5</sup> Many girl studies scholars cite the launch of *Girlhood Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* in 2008 as confirmation of the field’s legitimacy, however, girls studies research existed long before this landmark and continues to flourish in fields beyond the scope of the journal.

<sup>6</sup> This kind of temporal murkiness is also found in subcultures more generally; Jack Halberstam (2003) writes about queer engagements with subcultures and youth cultures well into adulthood as a way of disrupting heteronormative notions of time, progress, and life course.

inform the range of cultural sites and activities that I explore in my excavations of 2000s indie rock and its cultural mainstreaming. When I refer to the texts and media in my research as ‘girl culture,’ I am situating it within a tradition of critical scholarship that works to connect gendered assumptions about culture, media, space, and audience to overwhelming cultural anxieties about the flows and categorization of culture.

It also feels important for me to name girls studies as a framework for this research precisely *because* so little has been written on the intersections of indie rock and girl culture of the 2000s. Certain periods of history are associated with more texts and artifacts of girl culture than others (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2007, xxxi), and the notions we have about the 2000s reference a very specific slice of culture indeed. The 2000s are notable for the rise of blogging, MP3 culture, and other technologies that advanced the social practices and relationship-based forms of girl culture identified by Mitchell and Reid-Walsh in their overview of girl culture, explored in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 of this dissertation, and taken up by girls studies scholars ever since (see Keller 2015; Hodkinson and Lincoln 2008; Mazzarella 2005). When music and media from this era is mentioned in relationship to girls and girl culture, it is almost always pop music and mainstream media — a discursive move that in many ways reinforces the exclusionary boundaries of masculinist genres such as, for instance, alternative and indie rock.<sup>7</sup> Troubling these long held associations is undoubtedly part of a wider move in girls studies to address “the web of girls’ everyday lives in relation to the genres and institutions that shape them” (Driscoll 2008, 26), but explicit scholarly conversations that imagine girls’ nuanced

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<sup>7</sup> Under ‘music’ in *Girl Culture: An Encyclopedia*, the authors have included several boy bands, historic girl groups like the Go-Go’s and the Supremes, the Spice Girls, and powerhouse solo artists like Mariah Carey and Christina Aguilera. The closest the list comes to acknowledging indie rock is its inclusion of Riot Grrrl bands Bikini Kill and Bratmobile.

relationships to these texts and scenes are still thin on the ground.<sup>8</sup> There are some exceptions — Rebecca Williams (2016) writes about the cultural understanding of girl fans of the male-fronted indie rock bands that appear on the *Twilight* soundtracks as “interloping fans,” while Alyx Vesey (2021) examines the ways in which female-fronted indie rock is used to signal “sonic girlhood” on MTV programming in the 2010s. Both of these examples engage in transmedial analysis and assume that girl audiences have complex, layered, and often contradictory relationships to music alongside the screen cultures where music is first encountered. Using this type of intertextual, interdisciplinary, and intersectional girls studies as the primary theoretical framework for this project supports my goal of amplifying the voices of those cultural intermediaries who were so instrumental to the mainstreaming of 2000s indie rock, while leaving space for the complicated feelings that both fans and interlocutors hold for the music itself.

### ***Methodologies***

Throughout this dissertation, when I refer to the term ‘methodology,’ I am thinking of Sandra Harding’s (1987) definition of methodology as a theory and analysis of the research process. I understand the language of ‘method,’ by extension, as the practices of locating, gathering, and analyzing various types of research materials. Feminist methodologies are broadly united in their shared commitment to questions of power, knowledge, and subjectivity; fans, like feminist researchers, are deeply concerned with these same questions. While scholars such as Louisa Stein (2011) have elaborated on the “crucially interrelated” nature of feminist and fan studies scholarship, the overlap of the methodological frameworks underlying this scholarship is notably less self-evident. Because this dissertation locates itself at the intersection of these two

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<sup>8</sup> These same connections are made with notably more frequency in popular writing, I suspect because the ‘trendiness’ of recycling fashion and media has meant that the last few years has seen a mass reclaiming/redemption of many 2000s media franchises, from *Twilight* to *Jennifer’s Body*. It is difficult to have these conversations without them hinging on questions of girlhood and girl audiences’ power.



fields, it makes sense to draw from the scholarship on fan studies *as* feminist methodology to illustrate how and why I approach the study of music the way I do.

Despite its reputation as an “undisciplined discipline” (Ford 2014, 54), the stories that circulate about the emergence of modern fan studies are remarkably consistent. Most genealogies point to the publication of Henry Jenkin’s *Textual Poachers* in 1992 as the moment that fan studies first distinguished itself from the wider field of media and cultural studies and, as Briony Hannell (2020) points out in her survey of feminist fan studies methodologies, this has produced a very particular narrative of fan studies that has been shaped by white, male theorists. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Fan studies emerged out of a long tradition of feminist audience studies that pushed back against the dismissal of women’s tastes, consumption practices, and cultural forms (see Bacon-Smith 1986, 1992; hooks 1995; Lamb and Veith 1986; Penley 1992, 1997; Radway 1984). Despite this history, “the legacy of feminist cultural studies, its theories, and its methodological frameworks in the origins of fan studies is markedly absent in many of the stories we tell about how fan studies [and, by extension, fan studies methodologies] came to be” (Hannell 2020, 2.4). Jenkins himself has noted that he and other fan scholars have read and engaged with feminist writers — “engaging with their theories, circling around their examples, struggling with their methods” (2014, 93) — but because this work was not explicitly cited in the early days of the field, fan studies and its methodologies was separated from its feminist roots (see Driscoll and Gregg 2011). While feminist cultural studies grappled with the bounds and limitations of the discipline, fan studies methodologies have rarely been subject to the same tough questions, even as they have inherited and reproduced many of the same notable “gaps and silences” (Hannell 2020, 5.1). As in so many other modes of cultural studies, whiteness in fan studies continues to operate as an unmarked and unnamed norm (Dyer 1997).

Benjamin Woo has noted that, because fan studies was informed by feminist cultural studies' desire to push back "against the dismissal of women audiences and their tastes" (2018, 247), fan studies researchers are often much more sensitized to questions of gender and sexuality than those of race, nationality, class, and other identity markers (see also Stanfill 2011; Warner 2015, 2018; Wanzo 2015; Pande 2018). In identifying this project's grounding in feminist fan studies, I locate this dissertation within a lineage of feminist fan studies and take note of the field's ongoing complicity in reproducing "citational silences" (Hannell 2020, 2.6) as I draw on feminist theory and fan studies' interconnected histories.

As interrelated methodologies, feminist theory and fan studies both call attention to the situated nature of knowledge and acknowledge power relations inherent to the research process. Fan studies is often shaped by a close relationship between personal experience and the area chosen for study, a pattern highlighted by the reflexive use of the colloquial 'acafan' to describe the dual role of the academic-fan researcher (Hannell 2020, 3.4). In feminist fan studies, knowledge creation is ideally "a relational process that demands [the author's] sustained critical self-reflection, dialogue, and interaction" (Hannell 2020, 3.6). This hasn't always been the case; as multiple fan scholars writing on method note, feminist researchers have not always successfully combined analyses of texts with audiences' interpretations and uses for them (Brunsdon 2000; Hermes 2006). Early audience research within feminist cultural studies constructed a notion of the critical feminist researcher in opposition to imagined others (Brunsdon 2000), while work with popular media texts continues to be susceptible to "modernist [frames] of reference in which popular texts are always dangers and possibly damaging for the less-tutored" (Hermes 2006, 166). In this way, identifying oneself as an acafan and 'owning up to' one's fandom is an inherently feminist practice, highlighted by the ways in which this

framing has been intensely gendered. Suzanne Scott (2019) notes that debates within fan studies about self-reflexivity have notably fallen along “gendered lines” (42), wherein men question the usefulness of acafandom while women defend its connection to identity politics and more feminist modes of knowledge production (see Stein 2011; Coker and Benefiel 2010).<sup>9</sup> In this dissertation, it is important for me to make explicit this connection to fan studies methodology, both for the ways in which it foregrounds my investment as a fan as well as my commitment to amplifying the voices of the cultural intermediaries and music workers who have firsthand experience in so many of these scenes and histories. Fannish analysis and expertise is inherently valuable to theorizing fandom, both inside and outside of the academy (see Booth 2015) and, as White notes in their writing on indie publics, indie rock spaces often already encourage fans’ participation beyond that of straightforward production and consumption (2006, 54). All of my key informants had well-developed frameworks through which they understood their participation in the indie rock public(s) of the 2000s; while I want to acknowledge the power differential inherent to any form of qualitative research, I will also note that my position within the academy and theirs’ beyond it often appeared secondary to our shared investment in these questions as fans, cultural interlocutors, and — let’s be real — giant music nerds.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Methods***

My research combines qualitative interviews with narrative analysis, a cluster of analytic methods in cultural studies in which disparate stories and/or media texts are collected, organized, and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience (Riessman 2005). This dissertation is full

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<sup>9</sup> To quote a long-disappeared tweet from music writer Jessica Hopper: “Replace the word ‘fangirl’ with ‘expert’ and see what happens.”

<sup>10</sup> I was delighted but not surprised to find that many of my key informants shared a similar academic background as my own: journalism degrees and some involvement with university radio and/or television production. I contend that the kind of critical thinking taught in ‘j-school’ and the interdisciplinarity fostered by production backgrounds might be a fast track to a lifelong interest in asking hard questions of the media we love.

of overlapping cultural spaces — online/offline, film/music, DIY/mainstream — and so, with this in mind, the method I chose is one that weaves together academic scholarship, popular writing, interview data, and primary texts like films and of course music to construct and make sense of larger narratives. Jack Halberstam (1998) has described this process of mixing sources as an inherently queer “scavenger methodology” and feminist cultural studies on the whole is full of calls to bring unconventional and non-academic sources of knowledge into our research. Kath Weston contrasts “straight theorizing” with “street theorizing” (1995); José Esteban Muñoz understands cultural workers as producers of theory in their own right (1999); Tavia Nyong’o proposes a “punk’d theory” (2005); and Halberstam (2011), in addition to writing on scavenger methodologies, borrows and expands upon Hall’s concept of “low theory.” Gathering stories and information from ‘low’ or ‘popular’ places in the service of narrative analysis makes sense because of this dissertation’s focus on popular music histories; much of the historical records and recollections of this era and this subculture exist in public and popular places. It also never sat right with me, as a feminist scholar whose initial academic training is in journalism, to limit the sources for my work to scholarly ‘knowledge.’ Stacey Waite, in her writing on disrupting the essay form, expands upon Halberstam’s notion of scavenger methodology to remark that it might be useful to think of the process of research and writing as a scavenger hunt “whereby we look for certain categories of objects to bring together” (2015, 61). This also connects to the idea of “grounded research,” or the notion that all theory is iterative, always developing and being refined as more data is gathered and integrated (Keddy et al. 1996). I find it useful to conceive of the process of researching this project as this kind of scavenger hunt — following threads and stories through various texts and first-person sources to identify a meaningful narrative beyond that of mainstream music history.

One of the primary mechanisms that support this grounded research approach are my interviews. According to Irving Seidman, the language that researchers use to refer to the people being interviewed communicates important information about the researcher's purpose in interviewing and their view of that relationship (2019, 13). From the start, I conceived of the people I wanted to interview as key informants: experts in their own right who, rather than provide research data per se, could offer anecdotes and their own expertise to support my analysis of different cultural sites. My key informants were included in this project to teach *me* and help guide the research process; for this reason, key informants are identified by their real names and job titles, as their expertise as cultural intermediaries is precisely why they are being included.<sup>11</sup> In many cases, the people I interviewed were extremely used to speaking about their experiences — veteran music supervisors like Lindsay Wolfington have been interviewed about their projects by media outlets for years, while several of the bloggers I interviewed for Chapter 4's discussion of the New York City indie scene were included briefly in Lizzy Goodman's *Meet Me in the Bathroom* (2017), a behemoth of an oral history that includes over 200 individuals' reflections on the era. Rarely are the voices of these cultural intermediaries included in more scholarly discussions of these music scenes and cultural moments, however: an omission that I understand as both rooted in patriarchal modes of doing cultural studies and contributing to the telling of music histories that rarely consider actors beyond the artists themselves, industry higher-ups, and — with growing frequency in recent years, largely due to the work of feminized fan scholars — fans. My intervention into this polarization is hardly perfect; it would be incredible to conduct popular music research guided entirely by key informant interviews, for instance, beyond the seven individuals whose experiences and expertise I have included here. I

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<sup>11</sup> For a full breakdown of key informant's expertise and experience in the music industry, see Appendix A.

remain grateful, however, for any opportunity to disrupt this tendency to leave out the ‘below-the-line’ and often feminized intermediaries who have shaped so much music history without most of us ever knowing.

In early 2020, I began reaching out to people via email and on Twitter. I invited people to act as key informants based on their level of engagement — Jumi Akinfenwa was not a music supervisor whose work I was familiar with, but when an article she had written about the absence of Black music supervisors in the field suddenly exploded on my Twitter feed, I knew that her perspective would be incredibly valuable to a project that was already grappling with many of these same questions. I did not ask key informants many identity-based questions, as my interest was mainly in their expertise and experience as cultural intermediaries. However, all seven people interviewed self-identified as women. The whiteness of the music industry (and indie rock in particular) is a recurring theme in this research; to a certain degree, the diversity of my informants reflect this trend. Five of my informants were white or white-passing, one was Chinese American, and one was a Black woman. Similarly, while I was conscious of representing informants from various backgrounds, grounding this research in North American indie rock cultures meant that individuals with expertise in this area were from similar places and backgrounds. Four of the women interviewed were Americans living in the United States, one was a French woman living in the United States, one was a Canadian living in the United States, and one was from the UK. Some of the valuable insights included in Chapter 2’s discussion of music supervision also come from a roundtable I attended in November 2020 as part of the Canadian Guild of Music Supervisors inaugural *Sound + Vision* conference, entitled “So You Want to Be a Music Supervisor?” Although I did not conduct formal interviews with the four (female, white-passing, Canadian) panelists, their expertise provided additional direction and

valuable insight regarding the experiences of working supervisors today. I conducted seven semi-structured video interviews with informants in summer 2020, which I recorded and later transcribed. The main themes that emerged from analyzing these transcripts were remarkably consistent — because my informants were working in a similar field (Chapter 2) or were close friends during the events being discussed (Chapter 4), the overlap in experiences was significant. In keeping with the journalistic/scavenger method that informs this project, I incorporated anecdotes and examples where it made sense to do so, and also used the information I learned from my key informant interviews to guide further research and — in some cases — hone the focus of certain chapters.

The third and final method to discuss is my creation of the playlists that precede each chapter of this dissertation. Because the five chapters that make up this project focus on cultural sites and the music workers that populate those spaces rather than the music itself, these five playlists offer a space for close reading that is largely absent from the chapters themselves. They are also a space for me to trace some of my own affective investments and explore my attachment to these research questions and media archives as a listener and fan as well as a feminist media studies scholar. In keeping with this idea of ‘low theory,’ the inclusion of playlists in this project was an intuitive choice; it didn’t occur to me that this was a method in and of itself until it came time to write this introduction. The mythos of playlist-making is almost as deeply embedded in popular culture as music itself. In *High Fidelity* (2000), John Cusack’s character explains that making a good mixtape is “a very subtle art [...] a delicate thing.” Rob Sheffield of *Rolling Stone* uses the title of his memoir to proclaim that *Love is a Mixtape* (2007). And Jeremy Morris, writing on the usefulness of musical metadata, notes that when we organize songs into playlists, “We create new histories around them; ones not based on the wear and tear

of album covers or scratches on a disc, but ones still intimately tied to use and meaning” (2012, 861). Much has been written about the role that algorithms play in curating playlists, how gender structures — and ultimately limits — the content of playlists on various streaming platforms (Pelly 2018), and even how Spotify tracks and responds to users’ emotional states to suggest more sad songs (Sparks 2021). Considerably less has been written about playlists as method, despite the prevalence of playlists as paratext in many recent popular music books including Vivien Goldman’s *Revenge of the She-Punks: A Feminist Music History from Poly Styrene to Pussy Riot* (2019), Lizzy Goodman’s *Meet Me in the Bathroom* (2017), and Kai Fikentscher’s *You Better Work!: Underground Dance Music in New York* (2000).<sup>12</sup> These examples are not limited to any one genre of music or style of writing, suggesting that there is something recognizably powerful in blurring the line between reading and listening. James Peterson, in his book *Hip Hop Headphones: A Scholar’s Critical Playlist*, notes that the playlist “can become a tool that extends the potential for learning well beyond the classroom space” (2016, 81). He connects the potential for playlist-based pedagogy to existing norms of knowledge transfer within hip hop cultures:

DJs have to teach other DJs how to be DJs, MCs have to teach other MCs how to be MCs, and graffiti artists teach each other — and so forth. [...] The fact that Hip Hop’s [sic] artisans learned their crafts from established practitioners helped to generate the spirit of the non-traditional learning environment cultivated by and for constituents of Hip Hop.

All music subcultures have ways of bringing newcomers up to speed on cultural norms, existing canons, and what is ‘good’ music. I would suggest here that indie rock scenes on the whole are much less generous than the apprenticeship model of hip hop cultures that Peterson describes

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<sup>12</sup> Not all of these books have included playlists in the text — *MMITB*, for instance, has an associated Spotify playlist but no official track listing or indication of this playlist’s existence within the primary text. This raises important questions about transmedial paratexts (i.e. a playlist exists on Spotify only, beyond the ‘official’ bounds of the book) and their value as potentially more capacious, but also more ephemeral.



above; rather, indie rock knowledges are often withheld via rigorous gatekeeping and organized via strict hierarchies.<sup>13</sup> In this way, the resistive potential of the playlist as a pedagogical tool and/or method has a relationship to the cultural norms of the subculture it is trying to elucidate.

The songs on each playlist roughly follow the themes and theoretical content of the corresponding chapter. Of the five original songs on each playlist, I also consciously included at least one that is not from an all-male band. This was a choice that did actually require some thought, since so much of the 2000s indie rock canon is quite homogenous in this way.<sup>14</sup> Following a similar logic, each chapter playlist closes with a cover of the opening song performed by a contemporary female indie rock artist.<sup>15</sup> Not only do cover songs directly contradict indie rock logics of authenticity and self-seriousness (see Bailey 2003), but covers as a form also introduce exciting feminist and even queer possibilities to the use of playlists as a method. Cover songs provide an intertextual commentary, “simultaneously pointing to and developing dialogue with previous musical moments” (Jennex 2016, 92). There have been lively scholarly debates on cover songs’ relationship to notions of authenticity, liveness, and originality. Halberstam, in the 2007 “Keeping Time with Lesbians on Ecstasy,” argues that “the relationship between the original and the cover version is set up within the logic of the ‘cover’ to privilege the original and even to strengthen the notion of originality itself” (51-52).

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<sup>13</sup> See Chapter 1 for more on the history of gatekeeping and exclusion in indie rock cultures.

<sup>14</sup> All of the female artists and female-fronted bands that appear on the playlists — Regina Spektor, Rilo Kiley, Kimya Dawson, Yeah Yeah Yeahs, and The White Stripes — were regular additions to my own mixes at the time. This realization has led me to reflect on the ways that, conscious or not, I was noticing the gender politics of 2000s indie rock even as it was happening, and perhaps feeling more of a pull towards artists beyond the all-male norm. For more on how playlists can supplement traditional modes of feminist activism, see Vesey 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Credit for this idea goes to one of my key informants, music supervisor Dondrea Erauw, who has spent years curating a modern day *O.C.* soundtrack that includes the Lisa Mitchell cover of Phantom Planet’s “California” that closes the Chapter 2 playlist. I learned later that Alex Patsavas and Josh Schwartz used a similar convention on the soundtrack for their 2019 Hulu adaptation of *Looking for Alaska*. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Patsavas notes that covers with female vocals were chosen strategically to “help illustrate how [Alaska] was feeling” and help humanize a character who is granted relatively little interiority in John Green’s original novel (Sepinwall 2019).

Musicologist Erik Steinskog, meanwhile, suggests that the drive to cover songs comes out of cover songs' potential to destabilize the notion of originality (2010, 152). The inclusion of indie rock covers of indie rock 'classics' on these playlists aligns more closely with this second position; if covers give us information about an artist's musical influences — or “what a band has listened to and thought enough of to record and/or perform” (Mosser 2008, 4) — then I am interested in using the symmetry of these chapter playlists to explore the idea that indie rock lineages matter. What do contemporary female musicians' decision to cover these songs tell us about the ways in which, despite barely seeing themselves represented in the scene, they still found a way to connect with and see themselves in these songs? As Craig Jennex tells us, “Cover songs hold significant promise [because] they guide us back to a collective past in which we can place ourselves as participatory figures [...] they overtly tap into a collective history” (2016, 101). If we frame cover songs as a kind of temporal play or “temporal drag,” to borrow from Elizabeth Freeman (2010), it becomes possible to read these covers as an intervention into the homogenous 2000s indie rock canon. They function as both a reclamation and a reassertion of girls' and women's roles in indie rock history and, in this way, the structure of these chapter playlists amplifies the research questions at the heart of this dissertation.

### ***Dissertation Structure***

This dissertation responds to my research questions in the form of five chapters, written as standalone article-length manuscripts suitable to peer-reviewed publication. Each manuscript draws on different aspects of feminist cultural studies and speaks to a slightly different audience. This expansive approach is a vital aspect of interdisciplinary work — because this is a topic with little existing research, it made sense to write widely and with a mind to publish this research in a range of disciplines. Because of the manuscript-based dissertation format, there is some

inevitable repetition across chapters as certain themes and through lines become newly relevant; however, I have attempted to minimize this repetition wherever possible.

Following this introduction, Chapter 1 describes the cultural context of indie rock as a genre and a self-referential archive. This chapter places existing scholarly work on indie music cultures in conversation with feminist writing on bedroom culture and DIY cultural production to argue that indie rock rhetoric around retreat and marginalization lack a feminist citational politics. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the spatial metaphors that bolster indie rock's claims to authenticity and exclusivity, from record shops to garage bands, and contrast these insular spaces with the porosity of indie rock as a genre. This chapter draws on existing popular music scholarship on alternative and indie rock music and is also most closely aligned with girls studies, as it uses bedroom culture as its key theoretical framework. As a standalone manuscript, this article-length piece would be suitable for publication in the field of girls studies.

Chapter 2 turns to a discussion of television soundtracks and the prolific female music supervisors who exert such influence over soundtracks and screen media as tastemaking spaces. I draw on interviews conducted with working music supervisors to establish supervision and music licensing as a historically feminized production role that — in many ways, precisely *because* of this historical illegibility — emerged as a key site for the cultural mainstreaming of indie rock. This chapter describes the way that music supervision continues to be subsumed by 'fanboy auteur' narratives, in which television and film production roles are collapsed and gendered in ways that occlude the value of so-called below-the-line production roles like licensing and sync. I conclude that the way we make sense of music supervisors is linked to gendered ideas of music fandom as expertise, and follow the legacies of prolific female music supervisors of the 2000s whose work continues to influence younger supervisors to organize the

field and advocate for cultural legibility. This piece is particularly suitable for publication in music industry studies or feminist media histories.

Chapter 3 explores the trajectory of on-screen depictions of indie culture during the 2000s via three films released as indie crossover hits. This chapter connects indie music and indie film rhetoric while arguing that, with more distance from the moment of indie rock's initial cultural mainstreaming, cultural producers were able to critique and camp its gender politics. This chapter compares the backlash against the self-serious *Garden State* (2004), the deliberately quirky *Juno* (2007), and the unabashedly campy *Jennifer's Body* (2009) to conclude that, by the end of the 2000s, there was a growing taste for 'indie camp' that named indie rock masculinities as disingenuous and even outright harmful. This chapter also exposes the gendered assumptions implicit to our cultural framings of irony and quirk, and identifies the 'girliness' of certain texts as a significant barrier to those texts being read as significant cultural commentary. This manuscript would be suitable for publication in the field of feminist film studies.

Chapter 4 focuses on early music blogs from a particular indie music scene (New York City) as potentially resistive sites where the exclusionary legacies of rock criticism were challenged, even as blogs were folded into mainstream media coverage. I draw on interviews conducted with bloggers and fans who were embedded in the New York City indie rock scene during the early 2000s, and who saw their online writing picked up by publications like the *NME* as the mainstream music media adapted to the rise of online music writing that challenged the conventional rhythms of rock criticism. This chapter places these music bloggers in a long lineage of marginalized music fans shaping what I term the 'rock critic industrial complex' and — like generations of marginalized music writers to come before them — ultimately experienced barriers to continuing in the field. The purpose of this chapter is to expose the artificial

exclusivity of the mainstream rock media and position the early 2000s as a single case study in a long line of challenges therein, rather than a fluke bolstered by new technologies. This piece is suitable for publication in the field of feminist media histories or popular music studies.

Chapter 5, the concluding chapter, builds upon the historical background of the prior chapters to explore how technologies like the MP3 offered an overdue challenge to masculinist record-collecting cultures. Despite the anxieties that were sparked by an emergent wave of file-sharing software and online musical discovery practices, I argue that it is possible to read this cultural shift as a moment of reinvigoration, as a growing tide of young, female cultural intermediaries reinterpreted indie rock as a social practice first and foremost. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the blurring of online and offline music scenes as digital space continued to rapidly shrink the notion of a cultural ‘backstage.’ Drawing from popular music scholarship, this chapter unpacks how our cultural conceptions of ‘liveness’ are always already shaped by socio-historical ideas of authenticity. This manuscript would be especially suitable for publication in the field of feminist communication studies.

Preceding each of these chapters is a playlist that has been curated to reflect the themes of each chapter, as well as provide a sampling of the music referenced over the course of this dissertation project. I recommend listening to the playlists alongside their annotations prior to reading the corresponding chapter, however, repeat listening is also encouraged. I have compiled these playlists into a master playlist on Spotify, effectively marking this method and project as a product of its time. Music distribution practices (and their associated technologies) continue to evolve at a rapid-fire pace — no doubt future feminist media scholars who stumble across this dissertation will have already moved on to a trendier (and hopefully more equitably-designed)

platform.<sup>16</sup> Until then, this will have to do: <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2xHmboEqO8q6xxk5BD7hdZ?si=abe10298a5c04919>.

Ultimately, this dissertation responds to these research questions by revealing an intersection between feminist media studies and popular music studies that has not been adequately studied by current scholarship. If we understand indie rock as a genre and a subculture defined by its proximity to a particular kind of culturally literate, white, middle class, straight masculinity, there is untold value in complicating that narrative and excavating those moments of cultural uptake that saw the rigorously gatekept boundaries of this scene challenged. Using the various methodologies and theoretical frameworks outlined here, I emphasize the relationship between gender, technology, music, and fandom in order to explore the role of female cultural intermediaries in indie rock's cultural mainstreaming. This research highlights the ongoing need to challenge dominant music histories and introduce new narratives around 2000s indie rock's break into the mainstream, along with the potential for new audiences, new sounds, and new ways of being to be found there.

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<sup>16</sup> Spotify has been roundly criticized on several fronts, perhaps the most egregious of which is the way in which it fails to allocate fair royalties to artists (see Luckerson 2019, Sisario 2021).

## Chapter One

### PLAYLIST

This playlist connects to themes of indie rock citational politics and the ways in which indie rock artists self-reflexively engage with questions of reputation, authenticity, and indie aesthetics in their work.

#### 1. Indie Rokkers — MGMT (2005)

MGMT is an American indie rock band from Connecticut that had a number of hits in the late 2000s but also — to my knowledge, at least — wrote one of the only songs of the era with a title referencing indie rock itself, released on a 2005 EP while the band was still going by the much clunkier name “The Management.” The song itself is a relatively straightforward bop full of barely veiled references to car sex, but the lyrics also include the singer self-identifying as *a young man in [his] prime* and a nod to Don McLean’s “American Pie” with a line about Chevies and levies, respectively. It might seem a little ambitious to read this much meaning into a song that also includes a line about sexy limousines, but the deliberate misspelling of ‘rocker’ in the title seems to undermine the pretensions of the song’s protagonist, even as the lyrics draw on classic rock history and the definitively rockish themes of sex, cars, and girls.

#### 2. Us — Regina Spektor (2003)

Like so many other girls with a Tumblr blog and a tendency to over-identify with Zooey Deschanel in the waning 2000s, I was predictably obsessed with the movie *500 Days of Summer* (2009) when it first came out. The soundtrack, like many indie crossovers of the era, featured a mix of contemporary indie rock and pop and older rock — in this case, a truly distressing amount of Morrissey. At first listen, this particular Regina Spektor track has just the right amount of quirk and warble to soundtrack an offbeat love story like the

one featured in *500 Days* but — like the film — there are darker undertones here too. The song is a meditation on what happens when people flatten and popularize images of other people, effectively robbing them of selfhood and resulting in an awkward standstill while so-called tourists continue to stare and take photos. A single off Spektor’s third album and her major label debut in the context of a music scene that was still apt to frame such a move as ‘selling out,’ Spektor grapples with ideas of fame, the perceptions of her fans, and — ultimately — how artistic autonomy might appear to others from a distance.

### **3. Let’s Dance to Joy Division — The Wombats (2007)**

Awarded the prestigious title of “Best Dancefloor Filler” at the 2008 *NME* awards, this song represents yet another entry in the catalogue of 2000s-era indie rock singles referencing or appearing immediately adjacent to classic rock songs. The Wombats, originally from Liverpool, urge the listener to *dance to Joy Division and celebrate the irony* — presumably in finding joy in dancing to the notably dour Ian Curtis and company. Like “Indie Rokkers,” there’s a direct link between two songs forged in the bridge with the line, “Let the love tear us apart!” But the bouncy riffs and trope-laden lyrics of the rest of the song seem utterly uninterested in telling the listener *how* to appreciate the classic English rock band, nor are they overly prescriptive in telling the listener what their reaction ought to be. In fact, rather than listen in solitude, singer Matthew Morris seems positively giddy to subvert indie music norms and throw a dance party about it instead.

### **4. Fake Tales of San Francisco — Arctic Monkeys (2006)**

It’s hard to overstate the impact that the Arctic Monkeys had as a British cultural export in the late 2000s. In an indie music culture primed by years of Britpop, they were the



British indie rock band that made the biggest splash. The relationship between lead singer Alex Turner and British model Alexa Chung was the indie rock royalty couple that launched a thousand Tumblr blogs (and the subject of internet think pieces as recently as last year). But before mainstream success caught up to them, “Fake Tales of San Francisco” was their first North American radio single and — even before that — the very first track off their debut EP from 2005. It’s a bold opening statement to make; the lyrics disparage gigging bands who try to follow trends and encourage audiences to see them in a particular light and instead *get off the bandwagon* of what indie music ought to be. In my corner of the world, I was mostly oblivious to why a band like the Arctic Monkeys might feel a need to slag those on said bandwagon. I was fairly content to listen to their 2006 debut in my headphones as I processed interlibrary loans at my first part-time job and sometimes — if I was feeling particularly bold that day — mouth along to *the band were fucking wank... whatever that meant*.

##### **5. An Attempt to Tip the Scales — Bright Eyes (2000)**

It’s hard to come up with a band more synonymous with the self-serious, mopey, lo-fi stereotypes of late ‘90s and early 2000s indie music than Bright Eyes. But even at the height of their indie cred, and years before we tend to think of indie rock as becoming self-aware and parodying these same tropes, we get AATTTS: an eight and a half minute song that is actually two-thirds fake interview with Bright Eyes’ frontman Conor Oberst. During the exchange, in which Oberst is actually voiced by fellow Nebraskan and former bandmate Todd Fink, ‘Conor’ is asked about the symbolism of mirrors on the album. “[The mirror] could be vanity or self-loathing,” he muses. “I know I’m guilty of both.” Some minutes later, he notes wistfully that he “likes to feel the burn of the audience’s

eyes on [him] when [he's] whispering all [his] deepest secrets into the microphone.”

Bright Eyes would continue to release music on indie labels and, in many ways, is one of the groups that most embody the scene's rigid expectations of indie politics and distribution practices. As this track demonstrates, however, there was also a willingness to poke fun at indie self-seriousness that — had I known about — may have enticed me to actually listen to Bright Eyes instead of feeling like they were beyond my grasp.

## **6. Indie Rokkers — Soccer Mommy (2020)**

Sophie Allison (a.k.a. Soccer Mommy) replaces the synth-heavy instrumentation of MGMT's original with rolling banjo and notably softer vocals in this cover of the playlist opener. Hailed as a harbinger of the female-dominated indie rock band revolution alongside the lead singers of Diet Cig, Vagabon, Snail Mail, Speedy Ortiz, and more in a *New York Times* roundtable on the state of rock (Coscarelli 2017; see also Frank 2018), it's hard not to read Allison's decision to leave in the full lyric about being a *young man in [his] prime* as somewhat pointed. “I thought it would be cool to do a deep cut,” she explained to *Stereogum* of her decision to cover a song that no popular artist ever had (Breihan 2020). Allison's refusal to change the lyrics or pronouns in a song largely focused on a sexual encounter also effectively turns the indie slowburn into a queer anthem, reflective of the growing trend of young, queer songwriters (Allison is frequently mentioned in the same breath as artists like Julien Baker, Mitski, and Phoebe Bridgers) engaging with the tropes of rock music on their own terms.

## Chasing the ‘Bedroom Sound’: Indie Negotiations of Space and Gender

### CHAPTER ONE

RYAN: What kind of music do you listen to?

MARISSA: Right now? Punk.

SETH: Yeah, I’m sorry. Avril Lavigne doesn’t count as punk.

MARISSA: Oh yeah? What about the Cramps? Stiff Little Fingers? The Clash? Sex Pistols?

SETH: I listen to the same music as Marissa Cooper? I think I have to kill myself.

— *The O.C.*, S1E2, “The Model Home”

Teen bedrooms on screen in the late 1990s and early 2000s spark a particular kind of nostalgia. Mia Thermopolis’ room in *The Princess Diaries* (Marshall 2001) is covered in photographs, full of books, and features a wrought iron spiral staircase looped with Christmas lights. In Juno MacGuff’s, in *Juno* (Reitman 2007), you can barely make out the wood panelling of the walls behind the cutouts from magazines and posters that extend *onto the ceiling*. Cheerleader Peyton Sawyer’s, on *One Tree Hill* (Schwahn 2003-2012), features a wall full of vinyl records and personal, ever-updating artwork. Seth Cohen’s, of *The O.C.* (Schwartz 2003-2007), is less chaotic and more curated, with band posters and ticket stubs that evolve over the show’s four seasons alongside the character. According to culture writer Ilana Kaplan (2019), on-screen teen bedrooms become so memorable over time that they “begin to feel like your own.” These spaces are familiar ones, as comfortable and worn in as the narratives that they contain. They also, importantly, contain clues as to who we are supposed to want to be — if you’ve ever paused a scene to get a better glimpse of a band poster or book on a favourite character’s shelf, you’ve experienced this firsthand. The subtleties of teen media tastemaking are not about mere product placement, however. Coinciding with the rise of teen media during the late ‘90s, more TV shows and films began to use indie (short for ‘independent’) music on their soundtracks. In the years between the gradual wane of analogue music distribution practices and the rise of streaming services towards the end of the 2000s, soundtracks became one of the

primary modes of musical discovery for teen audiences. Indie music — and indie rock in particular — became an integral facet of teen screen cultures of this era, with characters like Seth Cohen framed as possessing aspirationally encyclopedic knowledge of punk and indie music and (understandably, we're led to believe) horrified by other characters sharing in his exclusive tastes. Indie music, despite its growing inclusion in mainstream television and film cultures, persevered as a genre predicated on its little-known-ness.

This chapter focuses on the contradictions inherent to indie rock, particularly with regard to various spatial metaphors commonly invoked to delineate different styles and ideas about indie music. The spaces that define indie — including the record shop, the bedroom, the garage, the live show — are varied, but I remain particularly interested in the ways in which indie rock writing romanticizes the bedroom and domestic space with very little regard for the gendered histories and politics of these same spaces. Indie rock is historically a white, masculinized genre whose artists and audiences are notoriously bad at identifying as part of a longer lineage of rock culture. This chapter places writing on indie rock in conversation with literature on subcultural theory and, specifically, girls' bedroom culture. While not exhaustive, I offer a critique of some of the limits of this self-understanding to ask: what is significant about indie rock's ongoing and varied relationship to bedroom spaces? How is the entrenchment of indie rock as a genre defined by a lack of citational politics at odds with its place in a longer history of exclusionary rock histories? And how might the pairing of bedroom culture with the existing writing on indie rock lineages work to uncover some of these contradictions?

### ***What is Indie Rock?***

The genre classification of 'indie rock' is frequently misunderstood as being synonymous with independent rock music. When the term was initially introduced and adopted in the mid-

1980s, this was indeed close to the truth; according to David Hesmondhalgh, “no music genre had ever before taken its name from the form of industrial organization behind it” (1999, 35). In the decades since, however, understandings of indie rock have moved away from strictly institutional definitions and — by the 2000s — have come to infer things about authenticity, gender, race, and sound in addition to its original institutional- and production-derived meanings. In other words, indie rock moved from an institutional definition to one primarily concerned with space: the importance of local music scenes, the cultural capital imbued in bands’ live performances, and — as the nascent internet saw the world becoming increasingly more networked — a renewed conflation of value with exclusivity. To trace this shift, I start by sketching out a brief history of ‘indie’ as a genre description before exploring the record shop as a site where many of these negotiations around authenticity and taste take place. I then draw on discussions of punk and emo masculinities to argue that indie rock’s aversion to reckoning with its place in exclusionary, gendered histories of rock music ends up recreating many of the same exclusions. Finally, I discuss how this retreat manifests as a literal move into bedrooms, and how these understandings of the bedroom differ from those found in feminist subcultural studies, and girls’ studies notions of bedroom culture in particular.

When the language of ‘indie’ first came to prominence in the 1980s, it understood itself as superior to other genres “not only because it was more relevant or authentic to the youth who produced and consumed it (which was what rock had claimed) but also because it was based on new relationships between creativity and commerce” (Hesmondhalgh 1999, 35). These new relationships, borne of old frustrations, saw the rise of smaller record labels as preferable to larger corporations because they were less bureaucratic and were also able to keep up with new trends in popular music as they came up in the scene (ibid). As Hesmondhalgh and other indie

rock scholars (Fonarow 2006, Spielmann et al. 2020) have noted, this move to locate record labels and other mechanisms of music production/distribution in local scenes, rather than corporations, singles indie out as the only genre to define itself via its production. And, perhaps *because* of this singularity, the original definition of ‘indie’ as independent has been riddled with contradictions from the start. While early (1980s) indie rock emerged from a punk sensibility interested in ownership over the production and distribution of one’s music,<sup>1</sup> by the turn of the millennium, this definition was clouded by new modes of independent/major label collaboration that nonetheless relied on discourses of authenticity and ‘realness.’

‘Indie,’ then, is effectively an umbrella term which can theoretically include music of any style, but most studies of indie are studies of guitar-driven rock bands. And while indie guitar rock might not have a cohesive sound, it *does* have a particular look. Indie guitar rock is “mainly white, male groups playing electric guitars, bass and drums [...] to primarily white, male audiences, recording mainly for independent labels, being disseminated at least initially through alternative media networks [...] and displaying a countercultural ethos of resistance to the market” (Bannister 2006a, 77-78). In other words, indie rock most often looks a lot like traditional rock bands, at least in terms of instrumentation — “the four-piece configuration is most representative of the ‘rock band’ in popular consciousness” (Coates 2002, 6). The prevalence of guitars, argues Matthew Bannister, is a clear indication of indie’s affiliation with an existing rock tradition (2006a, 78). Another indication is the clear linking of so many early indie record labels with record shops, a key piece of indie mythology with ties to notable indie labels’ formation, cultural capital, and pop culture representations of music of the era.

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<sup>1</sup> This is in stark contrast to more traditional rock discourses, which tend to “mystify and/or ignore” this process (Hesmondhalgh 1999, 37; Bloomfield 1991).

As Bannister points out, the history of indie is usually represented in terms of musicians, bands, and scenes, but could just as easily be rewritten as a history of record collectors (2006a, 81). Second-hand record shops and their owners often performed a pedagogical function for aspiring indie musicians, broadening their knowledge of musical history and — as Bannister acknowledges — frequently shaping the tastes and “distributing cultural capital” in a way that reifies particular rock histories (2006a, 82).<sup>2</sup> But the connection between record shops and indie labels also runs deep, with many early and influential indie labels started by record shop owners. Examples include Flying Nun Records, a foundational label in the New Zealand indie scene started by Roger Shepard in Christchurch, and Rough Trade, started by Geoff Travis in London (Bannister 2006a, 82). The early history of indie labels and scenes is one shaped by record collecting and an archival impulse; we can see this mythology reflected in the story of Rob in *High Fidelity*, introduced to the world in Nick Hornby’s 1996 novel before being further cemented in the cultural imaginary with a 2000 John Cusack film and then resurrected in a one-season Hulu series in 2020, starring a gender- and race-bent Rob played by Zoë Kravitz. At the end of the 2000 film and Hulu series, Rob reconnects with their abandoned music industry aspirations and decides to start a small record label in addition to running Championship Vinyl, a moderately successful record shop. In this way, the connection between record shops and indie music production/distribution is a key feature of the pop culture imaginary, accurately reflecting the historically close ties between the two.

This connection between record shops and indie labels becomes especially impactful when we consider who has historically felt safe entering music stores and record shop spaces. If

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<sup>2</sup> This distribution of cultural capital is not always strictly male; in her memoir *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl* (2015), Sleater-Kinney’s Carrie Brownstein writes about her formative experiences visiting a Seattle record store owned by Helena Rogers and her husband.

men and boys typically experience these spaces as pedagogical or world-expanding, those who do not fit the mold of ‘real music fan’ experience the inverse, namely, as spaces of blatant gatekeeping, discomfort, and even downright violence. These experiences have been codified in studies such as Carey Sargent’s (2009), which draws on ethnographic data collected from two different retail environments to describe how organizational culture is “driven by masculinist fantasies,” reproducing gendered interactions that affirm men’s control over rock music spaces, “even as retail work is presumed to be feminized” (665). According to another scholar’s account, “music stores tend to be male dominated spaces where experimenting with the technical equipment is a ‘norm,’ constructing an intimidating space for women to enter” (Taylor 2012, 33). Beyond an explicit reckoning with these gatekeeping practices, however, the knowledge that music shops and record stores are not safe environments for anyone who is not a straight, white, cis man is deeply and viscerally felt. Polaris Music Prize nominated artist Vivek Shraya (2018) notes in her book *I’m Afraid of Men* that, prior to entering a music store, she does excessive amounts of research to avoid having to “weather the condescension [of] male staff members [...] Or I just ask my boyfriend to buy my guitar strings for me. The snobbish, superior attitudes of such men have prevented me from calling myself a musician for years, even though I write songs, record albums, and tour” (5-6). The implicit knowledge that, if you are a girl, or queer, or trans, you need to be on guard in music spaces shaped by men’s exceptionalism and the intergenerational knowledge sharing of all-male canons is a persistent and off-putting reality.

The reason I offer these examples of record stores and their ties to early indie record labels is twofold. First, I want to underscore the importance of space and how it parallels discussions of authenticity in indie culture. This question of space is one that I will return to with the introduction of bedroom culture, but it also enters into the conversation in these overlapping



places and spaces where indie rock finds itself and finds others. These spaces include: the record shop, the bedroom, the garage, the gig, the mosh pit, the blog, the screen — all are locations I will return to and explore at length. Second, the idea of record shops and the archivist impulse they represent connects with these bigger questions of canonicity and citational politics. The record shop mythos stands in for indie rock’s simultaneous obsession with and self-conscious distancing from archivist impulses, and the way it both does and does not draw distinct lines between traditional rock masculinities and indie-er, softer invocations of the same. “The problem with many studies of independent or alternative music,” notes Bannister, “is that they treat it as if it really was independent” (2006a, 77). Bannister goes on to describe how indie’s emphasis on local ‘scenes’ effectively hide the ways in which the genre is nearly wholly constructed from “a revoicing of traditional and generic elements” (2006a, 84). Rather than the scope of experimental influences drawn upon in post-punk, ‘indie’ describes a narrower sound, influenced by a canon of “white, underground rock influences” (Hesmondhalgh 1999, 38). The whiteness of the genre was the subject of several music press commentaries in the 1980s;<sup>3</sup> by the 2000s, the whiteness of the genre was taken for granted (see “Stuff White People Like”). The irony is that indie rock groups’ attempts to depoliticize music and focus instead on its aesthetics reinscribes, in many ways, a history of white musicians imagining themselves ahistorical rather than tracing the lineages of Black music, musicianship, and knowledge production that birthed rock music in the first place (see Dinerstein 2017; Ford 2013; Monson 1995).

This same resistance to citational politics is also at play in how indie rock understands its own masculinities. In “Sizing Up Record Collections,” Will Straw writes that record collections,

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<sup>3</sup> Simon Reynolds (1986), for instance, noted that British indie-pop had “abandoned R&B roots for albino sources like The Velvet Underground, Television, Sixties [sic] psychedelia, rockabilly, folk.” There were also extensive debates in the popular music press over whether The Smiths’ “Panic” (1986), with its “hang the DJ” refrain, was a racist attack on Black music (see Rogan 1992, 255-256).

like sports statistics, provide “the raw materials around which the rituals of homosocial interaction take shape [...] each man finds, in the similarity of his points of reference to those of his peers, confirmation of a shared universe of critical judgement” (1997, 5). To resist the ways in which consumerism and collecting practices can be feminized, indie rock fans are likely to adopt a firmly anti-commercial stance, “valorising the obscure and transgressive” (Bannister 2006a, 85). The homosocial bonds that emerge from such practices are a key aspect of how indie rock masculinities have been written about and understood; even when accounts of indie have been by women, they continue to reiterate the homosociality of indie scenes (Bannister 2006a, 84). And while indie rock canonicity is certainly tied up with masculinities in particular ways (see Houston 2012), it is also important to expand the conversation in a different direction, namely, the ways in which indie masculinities purport to undermine hegemonic masculinity by softening its aesthetics while remaining complicit in the gatekeeping and anti-citational practices described above.

In her writing on masculinities and rock music, Norma Coates contends that masculinity is not an essential feature of rock, but a discursive construction that runs “so deep and with so many hidden tributaries that it takes on the appearance of immanence or of some original state” (2002, 2). Definitions of rock that gained prevalence in the last decades of the twentieth century, writes Coates, naturalized a particular brand of ‘oppositional’ white, heterosexual masculinity that was still very much at work during indie’s early 2000s heyday (2002, 7). Like the rejection of certain rock histories noted above, indie rock masculinities of the era constructed themselves as altogether separate from mainstream masculinities. This is of course not fully accurate; indie rock scenes only ever offered a white, heteronormative vision of oppositional masculinity that itself upholds an inequitable dominant cultural position and, as Jack Halberstam has observed in

his work on queer temporalities and subcultures, those small amounts of freedom and resistance granted to cis men in the scene often remain inaccessible to everyone else (2003, 324).

Confirming Halberstam's theory, attempts to read queerness into punk scenes and spaces like the mosh pit tend to focus on the homosociality and queer desires of scenes' male participants, as in José Esteban Muñoz's work on the 1970s LA punk scene and the Germs. "The flaying, annihilative spectacle of a mosh pit," writes Muñoz, "Was the gateway for many boys to touch other boys without having to wear a helmet and catch or throw balls in the air" (2013, 102). Punk shows, according to such accounts, represent opportunities to pursue "new modes of being in the world and enacting a punk's uncommon commons" (ibid), at a distance to more mainstream, heteronormative masculinities that reproduce themselves through pastimes like participation in organized sports.

The impulse towards these alternative masculinities can be to valorize them. In his excavation of emo masculinities, Sam de Boise notes that the genre is typically understood as "gender bending" and "identity queering" (2014, 225). Academic focus on the phenomenon also tends to frame emo as resisting more mainstream or typical masculine traits; "there is a similar tendency to see it as a form of resistance," writes de Boise, "because of its stress on emotional expression" (2014, 225; Anastasi 2005; Peters 2010). While this focus on emotionality is less prevalent in indie rock, there are certain parallels between the two scenes. Emo featured a return to more melodic rock arrangements, with more emphasis on singing rather than shouting — the former considered more feminine due to its links with embodiment (de Boise 2014, 227).<sup>4</sup> The shift from harder rock styles towards emo and indie also mark a significant move towards more

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to being feminized, singing is also frequently devalued as a technical skill. "Singing is generally regarded as natural," writes Helen Davies (2001, 306). "Anyone can do it and it is wrongly perceived as not requiring practice and work, and therefore undervalued."

lyrical introspection and a “conscious attempt to go beyond the hardcore tough guy image, musically, lyrically and image wise” (Kuhn 2010, 16). This is markedly different from its punk musical influences, which tended to focus more on political rather than personal issues, as well as contemporary music subgenres like hypermasculinist hardcore and metal scenes. As de Boise explores in his analysis, however, emo music and lyrics are still rife with barely concealed misogyny, where women still function primarily as muses and heartbreakers (2014). In the words of Jessica Hopper, whose groundbreaking 2003 essay “Emo: Where the Girls Aren’t” was one of first pieces of music writing to call attention to the paradoxes of masculinities operating in alternative music scenes, “emo just builds a cathedral of man pain and then celebrates its validation” (2003). According to another prolific music writer, Hanif Abdurraqib, “In emo, particularly during its heyday of attractive frontmen who fancied themselves poets, the misogyny was seen more as process than problem” (2017, 73).<sup>5</sup>

While indie is far from the only rock subgenre to invoke alternative masculinities, the way that it invokes gender remains closely tied to questions of creativity and authenticity, widely understood to be primary concerns in the scene. According to Bannister, “denial of influence was a way of reproducing the autonomy of the scene through rejection of ‘feminized’ nostalgia” (2006a, 86). This ‘straight edge’ ethos of abstinence, which frames dependence as weakness, no doubt works to compound the contradictions at work in these scenes. Research by Ross Haenfler (2006) on straight edge scenes confirms this; while many of the politics circulating in the culture promote progressive ideas about gender equality, the scene also supports contradictory masculinities, and women tended “to be placed at the periphery and ignored” (in Houston 2012,

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<sup>5</sup> Abdurraqib offers an equally astute critique of the whiteness of emo and punk music. In an essay titled “I Wasn’t Brought Here, I Was Born: Surviving Punk Rock Long Enough to Find Afropunk,” he describes a teeming mosh pit at a punk show as “a monochromatic sea crash[ing] against itself,” finally concluding that “nothing is more punk rock than surviving in a hungry sea of white noise” (2017, 54-58).

162). These three interrelated discourses then, of indie canonicity, masculinities, and authenticity, all share this same reticence for citational politics and — as such — are rendered unable to recognize that the myriad systemic factors shaping its aesthetics are the very same ones it attempts to escape.

And escape is an apt metaphor, since this move towards a softer indie masculinity has much to do with space and a calculated retreat from public space altogether. In *White Boys*, *White Noise*, Bannister notes that the garage bands of the 1960s and '70s gave way to the so-called 'bedroom' bands of the 1980s — an altogether different sound and ethos (2006b, 121).

The significance of this retreat from public space represents an attempt at a break, writes Bannister, from older, more traditional rock masculinities and their associations with “the street:”

In indie musical performance, masculine power is expressed indirectly, not as machismo, but as technical incompetence, implying aesthetic superiority; as knowledge from archivalism [...], a knowing invocation of past musical texts and practices; and through sound — usually that of electric guitar.

While certain signifiers act as through lines between old and new rock masculinities, like the sonic quality of electric guitar, indie masculinities actively reject outdated modes of 'doing' masculinity. Instead, as Bannister implies here, they choose to literally relocate, creating a rhetorical if not meaningful distance between rock masculinities and newer, indie ones and effectively drawing even more undefined lines around the already vague boundaries of the genre.

This move also includes a literal retreat, in many cases, away from the spotlight that mainstream rock acts are understood to crave. The 'technical incompetence' noted above also translated to stage presence. Gone were the elaborate glam rock fantasies of the 1970s (as with David Bowie and Gary Glitter); instead, bands wishing to be taken seriously “adopt the dowdy indie uniform of jeans and t-shirts, in order to imply that their music is the most important thing

to them” (Davies 2001, 306).<sup>6</sup> Instead, indie rock participated in a “deliberate muting of charisma” and shied away from personal promotion in the form of music videos or even putting pictures of themselves on record sleeves (Hesmondhalgh 1999, 38). By the 1990s, with the ongoing decline of radio and other media willing to play indie acts (see Chapter 2), there was “a widening gulf between [...] a stabilizing pop mainstream oriented towards video promotion, and synergies with visual mass media, and [...] a post-punk independent sector which set itself determinedly against these commercial methods” (Hesmondhalgh 1999, 38). This shift in framing indie masculinities in relationship to authenticity and public presence has everything to do with how we understand subcultural studies and — as I explore in the next section — how gender becomes entangled in these same expectations of space and belonging.

### *Subculture Studies*

While indie rock has never been strictly a youth culture, the field of youth-focused subcultural studies provides a necessary and illuminating lens by which to understand its impacts and cultural traces. Subculture studies is not macro theory; instead, it is what sociologist Robert Merton names as “intermediate theory,” located between “grand narratives and ‘grounded’ everyday life” (in Blackman 2005, 2). Despite this purported bridging function, the history of youth studies and subcultural theory in particular is rife with ideological tensions that center on the way in which notions of ‘subculture’ obscure more complicated engagements with questions of cultural legitimacy, authenticity, and belonging (Blackman 2005). It is my hope that unpacking some of these tensions and exploring the value of indie ideologies, their invocation, and indeed their broader role in upholding cultural binaries and boundaries will provide some

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Branch’s “All the Young Dudes: Educational Capital, Masculinity and the Uses of Popular Music” offers a robust discussion of how the appeal of glam rock is also located in its rejection of the corporeal experience of music and the privileging of aspirational, disembodied aesthetics for its male fans (2012).

theoretical footing for a more case study driven analysis of indie rock's cultural mainstreaming throughout the 2000s.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, studies of youth, style, and music relied heavily upon subcultural theory developed by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Subculture studies had gotten its start some decades earlier in the United States, where sociologists at the University of Chicago were largely interested in the ethnographic study of delinquency in urban settings, prescriptively categorizing subcultures as deviant (Blackman 2005, 3). Initial British theories, today understood to be the beginnings of youth studies proper, emerged from more biological theories of adolescence, but over time shifted towards a cultural studies approach interested in critiquing society and addressing issues of conflict and social change (and particularly issues of class) in post-war Britain (ibid, 16). The prolific work of the CCCS and Dick Hebdige (1979) on young people from this time established a theoretical foundation for the study of subcultures and popular culture more broadly; however, even the Birmingham school was not above critique. The first major challenge to subcultural theory came from within the CCCS, from Paul Willis. In 1972 (xlv-xlvi), he wrote that:

There has not been a vigorous analysis of the status of the culture a sub-culture is supposed to be 'sub' to. The notion implies a relative positioning which seems to give an altogether misleading sense of absoluteness and dominance of the main culture.

These early critiques of subculture studies grew into a more consistent push; by the 1990s, there were continuous calls to revise the established understanding of the term and its attendant theory.

The major critiques of subculture studies have been 1) that the term 'subculture' is too broad and does not pay adequate attention to the pluralities of lived experience as mediated by systemic oppressions and erasures, and 2) the role of media in producing subcultures is poorly theorized. One critique states that so-called "'authentic' subcultures were produced by subcultural theorists, not the other way around" (Redhead 1990, 25). The question of what

populations subcultural theorists studied and whose cultures were reified via scholarly attention was not always equitable; subculture studies has across the board tended to focus on white, male adolescence and — while the Birmingham School did attend to class with some nuance — other intersections such as gender, sexuality, and ability are rarely, if ever, mentioned (see McRobbie and Garber 1976; hooks 1992, 1999). The second critique, that of an inattention to media, is related. According to Andy Bennett, “[in] introducing the term ‘subculture’ into the wider public sphere, the media have completed the process begun in sociological work of reducing subculture to a convenient ‘catch-all’ term” (1999, 605). This dilution and over-application of the term, Bennett argues, has led to a lack of specificity, where the only relation between groups included in ‘subcultural studies’ is that they involve youth (ibid). Similar to how the notion of ‘subculture’ is too expansive, the idea of the ‘mainstream’ (and particularly the idea of monolithic, mainstream media) also needs to be contested.

Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Styles* (1979) was a defining text of the Birmingham School, and notably valorized opposition and rebellion against “a mainstream seen as enforcing hegemony” (in Weisbard 2015, 255). While the narrowness of Hebdige’s views of youth subculture drew far more critique than equally narrow definitions of the mainstream, the latter definition is just as deserving of attention. In the mid-1990s, Sarah Thornton drew on her ethnographic studies of British club and music venue culture to critique Hebdige and other mainstays of the CCCS in this regard, calling the notion of a mainstream an “inadequate term” (1995, 177). Thornton borrows from Pierre Bourdieu to develop a theory of subcultural capital, or the notion that one’s place in subcultural social hierarchy is defined by insider knowledge above all else. “Discursive distance from [the mainstream],” she writes, “is a measure of a clubber’s cultural worth” (1995, 18). Transposing this same lens to the world of indie rock, the



subcultural capital of indie insiders relies upon critiquing the mainstream as derivative, monolithic, superficial, and — notably — feminized. Some years later, Jason Toynbee posits that we instead invoke ‘mainstream’ as a verb, suggesting that we understand ‘mainstreaming’ as a process rather than a category of text or texts (2002). Today, much of music writing (both scholarly and popular) has been informed by this post-structuralist understanding of the mainstream, legible in countless arguments for ‘poptimism,’ a phrase that came out of an article written by Kalefa Sanneh in *The New York Times* in 2004 entitled “The Rap Against Rockism.”<sup>7</sup> All of this to say that, in proceeding with an analysis of the ways in which ‘subculture’ has left out fans and texts, and failed to consider intersections and nuances, so too has the idea of a ‘mainstream.’ This project thus advocates for a plurality of both subcultures and mainstreams, with the acknowledgement that individual case studies and conversations will almost always first require (re)definitions of both.

In *Club Cultures*, Thornton notes that the beginning of the end for underground scenes is popularization via a “gushing up” to the mainstream (1995, 18). In addition to being interested in the delineation between the ‘underground’ and ‘the media,’ Thornton’s work is also notable for her attention to place. Her book was part of a wave of research in the 1990s that focused on gig culture, excavating sites as varied as the rock show, the rave, the mosh pit, etc. This notion of “gushing up” is intentional. According to Thornton (1995), “These metaphors are not arbitrary; they betray a sense of social place” (18). Subcultural capital exists as an alternative currency, a new value system for young people — and young men in particular — embedded in subcultural scenes through which to understand and reinterpret their social worlds. It gives “alternative

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<sup>7</sup> Rockism, according to Sanneh (2004), “means idolizing the authentic old legend (or underground hero) while mocking the latest pop star; lionizing punk while barely tolerating disco; loving the live show and hating the music video; extolling the growling performer while hating the lip-syncher.” Poptimism, conversely, is the belief that pop music is as worthy of professional critique and interest as rock music.

interpretations and values” to boys’ subordinate status beyond those frameworks found in hegemonic masculinities (ibid). This not-metaphor of space is one concept that I will return to again and again. I turn now to the ways indie rock’s understandings of space goes beyond reframing subcultural studies’ assumptions about the inside-outside of mainstream and alternative spaces to also challenge the inside-outside of public and private space. We begin, as so many guitar riffs and song ideas and dance parties do, in the bedroom.

### ***Bedroom Culture***

The phrase *bedroom culture* was first used by Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber in their 1976 essay “Girls and Subcultures,” written in response to studies of youth culture coming out of the CCCS that predominantly focused on depictions of working class boys. “Few writers seemed interested in what happened when a mod went home,” wrote McRobbie (1991) of the growing field of subculture studies. “Only what happened out there on the streets mattered” (68-69). McRobbie and Garber were frustrated by the lack of feminist theory in the Birmingham School, and particularly troubled by the erasure of girls in youth-focused cultural studies. Girls, they argued, had always participated in culture and subculture. They were less likely to engage in cultural consumption practices in the street or other public places, and instead developed a “culture of the bedroom,” comprised of “experimenting with make-up, listening to records, reading the mags, sizing up the boyfriend, chatting, [and] jiving” (1976, 213). McRobbie and Garber’s essay encouraged researchers to consider the domestic as a vibrant site of youth cultural activities, and from this early work emerged an ever-growing body of work exploring the significance of bedrooms and bedroom culture in the lives of youth of all genders. The continued push to see girls’ experiences and voices represented in this literature also means that this early

work on girls and on bedrooms, specifically, has been central to the development of girls' studies as a recognized field of critical scholarly inquiry.

Much of the existing literature on bedroom culture can be neatly summarized by a quote from Simon Frith, writing just a few years after McRobbie and Garber's original essay: "Girl culture starts and finishes in the bedroom" (1978, 65). The notion of the bedroom as a nonproductive, consumerist space, in other words, is patently untrue. And yet, as girls' studies scholar Mary Celeste Kearney notes, "virtually every scholar who has studied adolescent room culture has reproduced [this idea], leading to a skewed perspective" (2006, 130). Kandy James, for instance, writes that girls' orientation towards the domestic is not only related to the control of young female bodies, but also stems from their fear of ridicule and harassment in male-dominated public space (2001).<sup>8</sup> Not only does this lens reinforce the idea that girls are sexually vulnerable only in public spaces, but James' analysis also goes on to discount girls' mentions of more active negotiations of this fear (such as playing guitar and writing) to focus on consumerist practices of reading magazines and listening to music (2001, 84-86). Sian Lincoln (2005) explores how girls construct multiple spatial 'zones' in their bedrooms using various furniture, technology, books, and media. Similar to other discussions of bedroom culture, however, the possibilities that Lincoln (2005, 100) imagines for these zones remain limited to cultural consumption, rather than production:

In their bedrooms, [...] girls have the freedom to engage in a number of activities, often at the same time, in ways that vary considerably from day to day. Their choice can depend on whether they are "having a night in," when the main activities may be doing [school] work, talking on the phone, watching television or reading magazines, or preparing for "a night out," when the girls may listen to music, drink alcohol, experiment with clothes and make-up and call friends on the phone to make arrangements for the night ahead.

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<sup>8</sup> It is worthwhile to note, however, that ideas of 'public' and 'private' space have changed considerably since McRobbie's introduction of bedroom culture, and even James' writing on it in the early 2000s. With the interconnectivity afforded by social media and teens' smart phones, the bedroom is increasingly a public space too.

Even Kearney is not immune to this flattening of girls' cultural production — in a 2006 article, she argues that the introduction of inexpensive, user-friendly media technologies had a notable impact on the productive possibilities of girls' bedroom cultures. The widespread availability of personal computers (PCs) in 1990s and early 2000s, she reports, has seen a vast increase in the home production of zines and girls' films. "Once dependent on technologies associated with the workplace, such as typewriters and mimeograph machines," the process of laying out and reproducing one's zine has been "greatly simplified and domesticated" via at-home computing technologies (Kearney 2006, 135-136). Girls' zine distribution, too, was dramatically democratized with the advent of this infrastructure. While zine distribution infrastructure, or 'distros,' have always been girl-centred, the grassroots mail-order businesses of the 1990s were slow and inefficient. Riot Grrrl Press, the first formal girls' zine network, reproduced and distributed girls' zines at a low cost. By the mid-2000s, according to Kearney (2006), the vast majority of US-based distros were managed by teen girls "using the Internet [sic] to subvert the generational dynamics of business while reshaping e-commerce for their own noncapitalist purposes" (138). While zinesters and aspiring filmmakers made use of the new technologies, Kearney notes that "few girl-made musical recordings created via composition software are in circulation yet" (2006, 136). While this statement might hold true in its specificity to composition *software* as opposed to other, older recording technologies, the lack of caveat or clarity is confusing given the proliferation of girl-made 'bedroom albums' during the 1990s and early 2000s (see below). I turn now to an excavation of this language of bedrooms and private spaces as they relate to indie rock legacies, and how this lack of theoretical cross-pollination, systemic analysis, and a robust citational politics left notions of 'indie' precariously and vaguely defined at the turn of the millennium.

## *The Bedroom Sound*

Indie is predicated, in many ways, on “an alleged refusal to participate” and a particular kind of subcultural capital that proceeds from an ‘exile’ cultural stance (Seiler 2001, 190). Ryan Hibbett writes in his 2005 article, pointedly titled “What Is Indie Rock?” that he associates the indie sound with something akin to the folk movement, “less politically charged and more self-deprecating” and attaining via its production a sound that is “conscientiously [...] ‘bedroom’” (59). Hibbett’s excavation of indie rock is one of a handful of scholarly texts from this era to address the genre explicitly; however, his is not the only one to make reference to bedrooms. In Cotten Seiler’s writing on the Louisville indie scene, he notes the music is made more for “bedroom contemplation rather than dancefloor abandon” (2001, 199). Seiler also underscores the way that newly democratized access to technology supports the indie musician’s desire to showcase his aesthetic superiority; “in basements and bedrooms everywhere,” Seiler notes, “new consumer technology is being employed to produce something that sounds antiquated and rough” (2001, 191). Indie rock celebrates this technological amateurism, seeking out the analogue sounds of tape, hiss, and distortion that mark homemade lo-fi tracks as the ‘authentic’ creations of a secluded creative. To once again borrow from Seiler, these audible ‘mistakes’ and imperfections are, to many, “the *point*” (2001, 191), conferring authenticity and a kind of audible verisimilitude upon the songs in which they appear. The values of indie rock aficionados, then, are reflected in the ethics of a genre that identifies the bedroom as the privileged or favoured site of both production *and* consumption, and this romanticization of domestic spaces acts to distance indie rock from hegemonic masculinities. In the process, however, this rhetoric attempts to align indie rock with a kind of ‘indoorsy intellectualism’ which — for those familiar with the literature

on girls' subcultures and the many ways that teens pursue embodiment and identity work in their rooms — we know is patently false.

The fact that this music is rhetorically positioned as ill-suited for dancefloors distances its sound, and its possible use(s), from those styles that rely on 'liveness' and dancing (see Thornton) and, in doing so, reproduces the genre as distanced from the body and embodiment. The disavowal of embodiment is written into the very history of music. The power of music has frequently been conflated with the power and perceived eroticism of the female body (Cusick 1999, 478), which led to a strategic move to realign music with the mind in an attempt to legitimize the fields of musicology and composition. Under this new framing, women were only able to *receive* music, in the absence of the logic and virtuosity required to compose. Female performance in music has historically been limited to voice, piano, and small stringed instruments that minimize the exertion or contortion of the body, but also, vitally, are well-suited to domestic spaces, and keeping girls and women within them as "fixed bodies in space" (Taylor 2012, 28). This dichotomy of mind/body goes beyond instrumentation to genre, as rock musics continue to be understood as linked to authenticity (masculine) while pop and dance musics are tied to artifice (feminine), less reliant on virtuosity or canonicity and more reliant on embodied affects and the literal movements of bodies in dance. Francesca Coppa writes of this split as a kind of hierarchy, noting that "the move down the hierarchy represents a shift from literary values (the mind, the word, the 'original statement') [to] theatrical ones (repetition, performance, embodied action)" (2006, 231). As we descend, remarks Coppa, not only do we move further away from 'text' and more towards 'body,' but also towards the female body, because embodied genres of writing and music are almost without exception feminized. I would add to this the important addendum that, along with becoming more embodied, moving down the hierarchy

from text to body also aligns with an increased emphasis on community, markedly different from the values of autonomous, neoliberal subjecthood that mark more masculinist genres and modes of consumption. Suzanne Cusick notes that much music is understood analytically, in terms of a sole creator or composer understood in terms of what she terms “*mind-mind*,” meant to be deciphered and interpreted to inform the practices of “other minds” (Cusick 1994, 16). Indie rock, then, is imagined to be a somewhat solitary enterprise, putting the marvels of twenty-first century technology to use to produce and share music that other indie fans can internalize and metabolize the genius of at their leisure, also in private space. It is, all in all, imagined to be a rather inward-facing and insular ordeal.

This is, of course, in direct contrast to the ethos embodied by girl culture of a similar era. In *The Punk Singer*, Kathleen Hanna (2013) describes the Riot Grrrl attitude towards bedrooms:

Girls’ bedrooms can sometimes be this real space of creativity. The problem is that these bedrooms are all cut off from each other. So how do you take that bedroom that you’re cut off [in and connect it to] all the other girls who are secretly in their bedroom writing secret things or making secret songs.

If the impulse of indie rock is to highlight the aesthetic purity of its music by concentrating on the insular, cerebral conditions under which it is produced and consumed, girl culture is driven by an impulse to instead transcend bedroom walls and *connect*, move, and feel. While still recognizing the generative power of the private space, this secondary mode (after all, it is not always gendered as such) fights for legitimacy; it fights, in a manner of speaking, to transcend bedroom walls rather than retreat behind them. In his research on gender and video games, Henry Jenkins (1998) builds upon E. Anthony Rotundo’s notion of “boy culture” (outlined in 1994’s *American Manhood*) to hypothesize that gaming represents, for many boys, escape from the domestic environment at a time when boys’ historically unencumbered access to the street and nature spaces was subject to increased limitations and surveillance. Drawing on social

geography studies, Jenkins writes that opportunities to explore a kind of “fourth environment” (outside the adult-structured spaces of home, school, and playground) and resulting “topophilia” (or heightened sense of ownership and autonomy from exploring) are under threat as suburban boy culture continues to disappear (1998, 266; Van Vliet 1983; Matthews 1992). Jenkins’ and others’ writing on alternative ways for boys to experience autonomy and exploratory play highlights the degree to which girls are always already confined to the domestic space. We can also see the use of emerging technology to facilitate one’s escape from the feminized domestic space in the history of ‘high fidelity’ (or hi-fi) home audio systems in the post-war era. According to Keir Keightley, by the 1960s, home audio systems “had hardened into masculinist technologies *par excellence* [...] men used hi-fi sound reproduction technology (including its necessary adjunct, the Long Play (LP) record album) to produce a domestic space gendered as masculine” (1998, 150).<sup>9</sup> Purposeful retreat can only ever come from a place of privilege; that such a move is both literally and discursively enshrined in the aesthetics of indie rock — and, as Keightley notes, masculinist music practices more generally — belies the cultural position (white, male, classed) they operate from.

There is a second domestic space that also belongs in this conversation of indie’s spatial metaphors: the garage. In her research on Filipino American music cultures, Christina Bacareza Balance (2007) writes that garages represent a meaning-laden liminal space within another liminal space (suburbia), “an architectural and sociological challenge” (140). Because they are considered “neither inside nor outside” the family home (ibid, 141) but rather the “nether regions of the household” (Rotundo 1994, 49), garages are often sites where youth subcultures flourish in

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<sup>9</sup> Not only did home audio technology provide escape, it also further emphasized the necessity of an analytical, logical appreciation of music to counter the embodied or domestic. Radio, with its “need to be constructed and tinkered with,” further legitimized music appreciation for men in the post-war era (Keightley 1998, 150; Douglas 1999).



the cracks between domestic and public space. Notably, they also stand in as symbols of the suburbia that ‘serious’ musicians are tasked with escaping, lest they doom themselves to a lifetime of mediocrity. Music writers Simon Frith (2007) and Jon Savage (1991) have both written about the prominent influence of suburban experience on British punk, new wave, mod, and pop music, and Donna Gaines writes about “rock and roll kids” in her study of music in American suburbia, *Teenage Wasteland* (1998). In *The Sprawl: Reconsidering the Weird American Suburbs*, Jason Diamond (2020) notes that “punk [was] largely a scene that was born in New York City and London but that had its teenage years in the suburbs” (155-156). According to Karen Tongson, “we have *heard* the suburbs in the music made there in garages, basements, and living room piano lessons” (2011, 24); the lyrical trope of escaping a small town or suburbia is so central to early 2000s emo and pop-punk that it even inspired a whole genre of meme (Viscovi 2016; Rolli 2020). “While every suburb is different in some way,” notes Diamond (2020), “What links them from coast to coast is that undercurrent of strangeness, of bottled-up energy, rage, passion, creativity — the greatest suburban exports” (xvii).<sup>10</sup> If garages function as a microcosm of suburbia, and they are also the wellspring for these styles of music listed above, then it follows that we can learn a lot about the spatial metaphor of the garage. Not only that, but if we understand ‘garage rock’ as a form of recoding domestic space similar to the gaming cultures discussed by Jenkins and Rotundo, above,<sup>11</sup> we can also learn from the fact that indie so self-consciously identifies itself with the bedroom over the garage. What does this tell us

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<sup>10</sup> In 2014, Marc Fischer and Public Collectors, a resource that collects pre-internet music ephemera from zines to show flyers to posters, used the then-popular popular blogging platform Tumblr to start Hardcore Architecture, a site created to explore “the relationship between the architecture of living spaces and the history of underground American hardcore bands in the 1980s” using Google Maps to plot the mailing addresses listed in hardcore and punk zines from 1982 to 1989 (in Diamond 2020, 157). An overwhelming majority of the bands were from the suburbs.

<sup>11</sup> The terms ‘garage rock’ and ‘garage band’ entered into popular usage in the mid-1970s to describe a new kind of sloppy, energetic sound and was — notably — applied exclusively to those who were young, white, suburban, and male (see Diamond 2020, 144-145).

about the geographies of indie rock and the prevailing authenticity narratives that shape the genre's myths and norms? Who has access to these different spaces? Who *wants* access but does not have it? And how does this all connect to bedroom culture?

Garages and bedrooms are both potent spatial metaphors that go beyond four walls. Garages in suburbia store tools and technology, often understood as male-coded spaces where, in the absence of vehicles and lawnmowers, male-coded music is practiced and masculinities are performed. For girls to access genres and styles of music making that 'require' garage spaces by virtue of their noise, loudness, and band size is an achievement in a musical landscape where girls' music is still framed as "nice, polite, acoustic" (Liz Naylor in Downes 2012, 209). In *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), the metaphor of the garage as musical freedom prevails in the third season of the series, when Lane Kim (Keko Ageina) joins the band Hep Alien. Up until this point, Lane has been living a kind of double life due to her mother's strict religious adherence, hiding rock CDs and makeup under her floorboards and learning the drums in secret, having bribed a local music shop owner to let her practice after the store closes. After meeting Dave Rygalski (Adam Brody) and joining Hep Alien, the band — consisting of the traditional rock lineup of drums, rhythm guitar, lead guitar, and bass — is able to practice in Lorelei's garage. The garage offers Lane the necessary distance from her immediate domestic space and family of origin to follow her musical passions, acting as a kind of shorthand for the style of music and ethos being pursued.<sup>12</sup> This kind of scrappy, DIY rock is shorthand for Lane's rebellious streak, constantly in tension with her impulses to remain a 'good' girl and an obedient daughter.

Girls are frequently discouraged from playing electric or 'rock-ier' instruments for reasons that vary from negotiating male-coded technologies to forgoing bodily markers of

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<sup>12</sup> Lane's playing in Hep Alien also signals a kind of crossing over into a white-coded space as well as a masculine one; for more on discourses of authenticity and Asian American musicians, see Wong 2004.

femininity such as long nails and soft hands (Bayton 1998, 39); however, as Monique Bourdage argues, “critics who locate the instruments inaccessibility to women solely in its physical design overlook cultural reasons for the lack of great female electric guitarists” (2011, 1).<sup>13</sup> Girls Rock Camps, started in 2001 in Portland, Oregon by Misty McElroy with the express intention of breaking down these barriers, grew largely out of the Riot Grrrl conviction that girls didn’t have to know how to play their instruments exceptionally well to make a difference. Beyond its punk rock roots, this ethos also stemmed from an awareness that misogyny in rock spaces often keeps girls out of formal and informal teaching spaces (from guitar lessons to record shops) that would allow them to enter rock music spaces wielding the same kind of virtuosity as their male peers. Thus, the drive for girls to escape their bedrooms and get out into the ‘world’ of rock, in garages and at shows, is altogether different than for boys, who often already have access to this kind of technology- and privilege-infused space.<sup>14</sup>

The discursive differences between garage rock and bedroom rock, then, vary wildly depending on the positionality of the musician in question. If a girl rocker’s goal is to someday escape the confines of the bedroom, we need to also consider the ways she can do that without the aid of a garage and obliging rock band. Quite contrary to Kearney’s (2006) claim that “few girl-made musical recordings created via composition software” were in circulation yet by the mid-2000s, there were a number of influential albums recorded by girls and women in their bedrooms through the late ‘90s and early 2000s. After taking a step back from Bikini Kill to deal with mounting health concerns, Kathleen Hanna made her solo debut *Julie Ruin* (1997) from her

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<sup>13</sup> In keeping with histories of men barring women from certain technologies once they have co-opted them, playing the guitar was actually a popular hobby for women prior to the instrument’s electrification (Strohm 2004).

<sup>14</sup> It is important to note, however, that both garages and (private) bedrooms also belie a certain degree of privilege just by virtue of being quasi-private domestic spaces. If we consider the type of housing to have a garage both spacious and empty enough to house a band practice, or a layout that allows a teenager to have their own bedroom, with enough space and time to listen to (let alone produce) music of their own choosing, we start to observe these intersections at work. For more on expanding definitions of suburbia, see Spigel (2001) and Tongson (2011).

Olympia, Washington apartment. “I wanted the Julie Ruin record to sound like a girl from her bedroom made this record but then didn’t just throw it away or it wasn’t just in her diary but she took it out and shared it with people” (2013). While *Julie Ruin* was always meant to be shared, another iconic girl-made bedroom record began as an optimistic experiment. In the early ‘90s, Liz Phair was forced to move back into her childhood bedroom after failing to find a job straight out of college, “no life, no job, nothing [...] living in my goddamn old room” (in Centawer 2018, 58). She started recording original songs to tape using a four-track machine; the three tapes she made in 1991-1992 were rereleased as a collection called *Girly-Sound*, which contains early versions of songs she would later include on 1993’s record-breaking *Exile in Guyville* (Centawer 2018).<sup>15</sup> These two early examples of ‘girl’-made (Phair was 23 when she made her tapes, Hanna was 29 at the time of *Julie Ruin*’s release) bedroom albums, consistent with an indie rock ethos of production and rich with talent, are nonetheless rarely considered when the boundaries of ‘bedroom albums’ are being drawn. In a 2020 list of “The Best Albums Made at Home,” only one female musician (Billie Eilish) made the list; in similar listicles from 2014 and 2016, women make up two and zero, respectively (Mic.com; Festicket.com; Gigwise.com).

Bedroom recordings are imbued with a certain degree of ephemerality, of course. Tapes like those Phair and Hanna made in the 1990s came from women who were necessarily taking leave from public space, whether to hide from media speculation and stalkers (Hanna) or just feeling ‘stuck’ in her childhood space at a crossroads (Phair). In many ways, their experiences echo McRobbie and Garber’s writing on girls in subculture: that girls, denied safe or easy access

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<sup>15</sup> The title of Phair’s 1993 album is largely understood to be in response to the Rolling Stones’ *Exile on Main Street*, and it is certainly easy to read Phair’s self-deprecating, lo-fi rock as commentary on the hegemony of masculinist rock that groups like the Stones represent. “That she hadn’t actually heard that record before she started making her own only seems indicative of the strange pervasiveness of those ideas,” writes Amanda Petrusich (2018) for *Pitchfork* on the occasion of the album’s twenty-fifth anniversary. “if you were hanging around dudes, Keith and Jagger were in the air.”

to more public or more traditional spaces of subcultural production and consumption, will make do in their rooms (1977). The fact that even the canon of ‘great bedroom albums’ is dominated by male artists speaks to the ability of rock masculinities to drown out girl culture, to turn making a record in one’s bedroom into an act of retroactive kitsch ‘cool’ instead of a creative process borne of necessity. Even as technology filtered into bedrooms and made the act of recording oneself more democratic than ever before, girls faced barriers when it came to canonicity, or who is remembered as important and who is remembered as a fluke. For girls, bedrooms remain ephemeral; for boys, they are an origin story on the way to something bigger and historically significant. Kathleen Hanna making *Julie Ruin*, Lane Kim practicing drums, Marissa Cooper falling in love with the Clash — the goal is always dissolving one’s bedroom walls. For indie masculinities, bedroom records are a piece of trivia to bolster one’s subcultural capital (Thornton 1995); a piece of knowledge to trade for indie cred at the record shop and to heighten the experience of listening to a rare early recording in a similarly insular space.

### ***Conclusions***

The strong connection between teens, their bedrooms, and music is one that appears again and again in 2000s media franchises. Resisting narratives of ‘universal teenagerdom’ promoted by marketing agencies and popularized by moments of cultural anxiety (see, for example, Gaines 1998), the tropes of music and teen bedroom culture appear and reappear in the 2000s in ways that push back against one dimensional tropes and assumptions of how adolescents ‘use’ the space. Lane Kim of *Gilmore Girls*, as previously discussed, moves from hiding forbidden rock CDs under her floorboards to practicing and performing with a bona fide garage rock band. Peyton Sawyer’s bedroom, on *One Tree Hill*, became “even more like a character” in Season 5 of the series, when Peyton (Hillarie Burton) starts an independent record

label called “Red Bedroom Records” (Kaplan 2019). In both of these cases, girls’ bedrooms are framed as sites of generative, creative potential that lead to young women ultimately moving beyond their bedroom walls to create, to connect, and to build on their projects in a way that builds forward momentum. Girls’ bedrooms are frequently depicted as expansive, in sharp contrast to the more insular, contractive affect of bedrooms in masculinized narratives of adolescent music fandom and challenging, in no uncertain terms, indie rock’s privileging of the ‘bedroom sound’ and ‘quiet contemplation’ above joyful affects and connection to bedrooms as familiar as one’s own.

## Chapter Two

### PLAYLIST

This playlist offers a closer look at some of the songs that Alexandra Patsavas used in various 2000s television franchises that effectively established 2000s indie rock and TV as symbiotic media forms.

#### 1. California — Phantom Planet (2002)

When I started mentioning to people that I would be watching *The O.C.* in full for the very first time, the most common response I got was friends immediately launching into a warbled rendition of its infamous theme song. Before *The O.C.*, Phantom Planet were just a Los Angeles band named after a 1961 B-movie who had been trying to make it happen since the mid-90s. Now, the ballad serves as the single greatest testament to the enduring power of the show's tastemaking powers. I have still never heard another Phantom Planet song; for all I know, they might be an elaborate hoax cooked up by Josh Schwartz and Alex Patsavas. And I absolutely, unequivocally do not care. California, here we come!

#### 2. A Movie Script Ending — Death Cab for Cutie (2002)

This was the first of three Death Cab songs to make it onto *The O.C.*, but the band is folded neatly and incessantly into the show's canon by virtue of Seth Cohen's all-consuming fandom. One music writer even credited Cohen's character with bringing about the Bellingham, Washington band's shift from "the property of indie rock insiders" to mainstream favourites, ushering in new potentialities for alternative masculinity akin to Nirvana (Phillips 2004). "The revolution is coming," she notes, "And it listens to Death Cab for Cutie." Death Cab would go on to play songs off their album *Transatlanticism* (2003) at The Bait Shop in the second season, soon after they signed to Atlantic Records and right around the time preteen me was perfecting the art of staring

morosely out minivan windows soundtracked by what Summer Roberts once described as “one guitar and a lot of complaining.”

### 3. Portions for Foxes — Rilo Kiley (2004)

I attended a virtual DJ night in the depths of the first COVID lockdown organized by music writer and notable Rilo-head Tatiana Tenreyo, so it wasn't exactly shocking when this song popped up in an early set. What was shocking was the fact that lodged in some musty corner of my brain was every word, every key change, every drum fill — this is a song that *sticks*. Another Los Angeles group and one of the few female-fronted indie rock groups of the time to gain mainstream recognition, the band soundtracks a particularly vulnerable conversation in Season 2 of *The O.C.* between Marissa Cooper and Alex (played by Olivia Wilde), who feature in the show's mostly not bungled attempt at a queer storyline. Olivia Wilde would go on to date Harry Styles while Jenny Lewis, after a successful solo career beyond Rilo Kiley, got to deliver her earworms to a whole new generation opening for the One Direction alumnus on his 2021 North American tour. Teen girls stay winning.

### 4. Girl — Beck (2005)

In addition to having guest artists perform on the show at The Bait Shop, *The O.C.* was also responsible for premiering new music from multiple artists over the course of its run. After up and coming bands like Death Cab saw record sales jump following their inclusion on the show, artists from U2 to the Beastie Boys to Coldplay would reach out to Schwartz and Patsavas to be featured on the show and access what one magazine coined “the *O.C.* effect” (Kroth 2005). The most noteworthy example of this is the so-called “Beckisode,” wherein Beck debuted five tracks from his upcoming album *Guero* (2005).



This is the first of the five songs to play in the episode and is also noteworthy for the ways in which it — like many indie rock hits of the era — anonymizes and glamorizes a one-dimensional girl character who exists mainly to intrigue and motivate the male songwriter as he watches her *crawling out from a landfilled life, scrawling her name upon the ceiling*. Like, five dollars to the first person to figure out what this even means.

#### **5. Young Folks — Peter Bjorn and John (2006)**

While we may have been too young to catch the full force of *The O.C.* as it aired, my younger sister and I did eagerly watch (and get hot music tips from) the first several seasons of *Gossip Girl* — another of Patsavas’ prolific projects. This song, from Swedish group Peter Bjorn and John, was featured in the first scene of the show’s pilot episode, effectively setting up a show that was very different from *The O.C.* in terms of locale and tone but similarly astute when it came to the songs it saw licensed and the indie rock bands it helped popularize. The Kooks would record a cover of the song for *Gossip Girl*’s 100th episode, testament to the centrality of the song to the show’s canon but also effectively underscoring the tendency of Schwartz and Patsavas’ collaborations to self-mythologize, even as they are actively airing, through the self-referentiality of their soundtracks.

#### **6. California — Lisa Mitchell (2017)**

When I spoke to LA-based music supervisor Dondrea Erauw, she — like so many other women I interviewed while writing this dissertation — cited *The O.C.* as a formative influence on both her music taste and her eventual interest in working in licensing herself. “I still get very nostalgic over those sounds,” she told me, explaining that she’s spent several years curating a contemporary *O.C.* playlist on Spotify that is now up to

130 songs and eight solid hours of music. “If I hear a track and I’m like, this would be on [the soundtrack] if it was still on air [...] you know, there are those styles and sounds that make me feel like [it belongs].” The show itself was unafraid to utilize covers for effect — for a fourth season episode that dabbles in alternate reality, the theme song is covered by Mates of State. Something about the breathiness of the Lisa Mitchell version that opens Erauw’s playlist, however, evokes the slow build angst of the Phantom Planet original while also gesturing to the ubiquity of this song for a generation of *O.C.* fans.

## Below the Line, Behind the Scenes: Music Supervisors as Cultural Intermediaries

### CHAPTER TWO

MARNIE: What the fuck are you doing here?

DESI: Marnie, I have to talk to you.

MARNIE: Desi, no means no. The divorce is happening. I told all of our friends—

DESI: This is bigger than our divorce! This is bigger than anybody's divorce! Marnie, we got the call.

MARNIE: What?

DESI: Alex Patsavas.

MARNIE: Alex Patsavas. Alex Patsavas? *Alex Patsavas?!?*

DESI: Yeah, man.

HANNAH: Who the fuck is Alex Patsavas?

MARNIE: Hannah, pick up a newspaper. She does all the music on Grey's Anatomy.

DESI: Well, let's not minimize, Marnie, she also fucking killed it on Twilight.

MARNIE: Gossip Girl.

DESI: Gossip Girl.

MARNIE AND DESI: *O.C.*

— *Girls*, S5E7, “Hello Kitty”

For people invested in the flows and functions of music in culture, music supervision is a unique space of convergence. Industry conventions, access, and tastemaking all converge on a single, behind the scenes role: the person whose job it is to select and license the rights for songs' inclusion in film and television soundtracks. For many, the specifics of the job are mired in romantic ideas about making playlists for a living and — even for people who end up working in sync — music supervision as a field is initially often mysterious and misunderstood. “I think I went to the movies [and] saw the title ‘music supervisor’ and was like, ‘I bet that’s what it was called,’” recalls Lindsay Wolfington, who went on to work on *Smallville* (2001-2011) and *One Tree Hill* (2003-2012). It was the first time it had ever occurred to Wolfington that it might be someone’s job to choose the music she heard on-screen. According to Amy Eligh, a Canadian supervisor who works with Toronto’s renowned Arts & Crafts label, “When you start in the music industry you’re like, ‘What’s the job where I can just listen to music and go see cool bands and get tickets [and] be the cool guy at parties?’ And everyone thinks music supervision.” This

romanticized view of sync (the industry term for music licensing and supervision) is largely buoyed by the reputations and repertoires of prolific supervisors such as Alex Patsavas, who worked on a multiple popular 2000s franchises. As one culture writer puts it, “Whether you knew it or not, [Patsavas] is likely the person who’s kept [your ear to the ground for new music]” during this era (Neumann 2017). Callbacks such as the one in Season 5 of HBO’s *Girls* (2012-2017) allude to the lasting legacies of those soundtracks and Patsavas as the person behind them, while also nodding to the prevalence of teen sitcoms and franchises aimed at young, female audiences as key sites where this musical tastemaking took place.

The history of music supervision is implicitly gendered, and the rise of TV soundtracks in the late 1990s meant a renewed connection between feminized media and the feminized cultural intermediary. The history of television as a feminized media, circulated and consumed almost exclusively in domestic spaces, also means that female music supervisors in the 2000s played an important role as tastemakers for a generation of youth caught between the analogue music distribution modes of the ‘90s and the rise of streaming services/digital distribution of the 2010s. This chapter examines the role of music supervisors and TV soundtracks as a key site where musical tastemaking occurs. Drawing on interviews with music supervisors representing a range of ages, nationalities, and experiences, I argue that an important aspect of 2000s music supervision has been the legacy that genre-defining female music supervisors have inspired in younger supervisors, cementing cultural ties between girl culture and indie rock, and also creating a new kind of canon for girl scholars and media theory to frame discussions of the early 2000s. How have female music supervisors fought to have their role as cultural intermediaries taken seriously and legitimized in light of the role’s historical obscurity and derision? How and to what degree do industry standards and conventions make this difficult? And how do we

remember these cultural artifacts in ways that occlude the connection between soundtracks and the girl audiences they were positioned to reach?

### ***Interview Methodologies***

When I first began sketching out the parameters of this project, one of the earliest and easiest decisions I made was that it had to include conversations with working music supervisors. There is, as it turns out, a vibrant literature on the media industries and histories of television, radio, and teen culture. There is also a wealth of popular writing (magazine articles, mostly) of the era that details the culture-shifting impact of powerhouse supervisors like Patsavas. What I saw unfolding in contemporary coverage of music supervision and conversations ‘overheard’ on Twitter, however, was a rich and nuanced discussion of the legacy of 2000s television music supervision and the ongoing fight to have this field recognized and legitimated. I knew that in order to accurately represent the depth of the questions I wanted to ask of this time, of this media, and of these people, I needed to include supervisors’ voices.

I began by following a large number of working music supervisors on Twitter and paying attention to who spoke regularly about the status of the field, their influences, and seemed committed to demystifying the work. I also triangulated these observations against my own steadily growing knowledge of the 2000s canon, and what soundtracks seemed the most central to my project. Knowing that I was inevitably going to end up discussing *Garden State*, I reached out to Amanda Scheer-Demme, but she is no longer working in music supervision and eventually declined to speak with me. I even reached out to Chop Shop Music Group, Patsavas’ music company and record label, with no response. In the end, the folks I ended up speaking to were those who existed at the intersection of two major categories: influential or influenced by 2000s texts, and outspoken about music supervision as a whole. Actual scene analysis and soundtracks

are not part of this analysis, simply because my focus is on the culture that produces and circulates certain ideas about music supervision and music supervisors. Looking at soundtracks would, of course, provide a deeper connection between the previous chapter's analysis of indie rock ideologies and the cultural mainstreaming function of these television programs, but to include soundtracks would greatly increase the scope of this project. Instead, I have decided to prioritize what I see as a vital, missing piece of the conversation: the voices and reflections of female music supervisors themselves.

In total, I conducted one-on-one interviews with three working female music supervisors — one who worked through the 2000s and was involved in many influential shows of the era, and two younger supervisors who cite the influence of this earlier generation of both music supervision and 2000s teen/girl culture.<sup>1</sup> Interviews covered such topics as how the supervisors learned about and entered into the field; how their music fandom impacts their work; ideas concerning legacy and nostalgia; and their ongoing critiques of the field and its cultural legibility. These interviews also alerted me to the extensive organizing taking place in the field to not only provide resources to working music supervisors, but also to raise awareness of what music supervisors do for others professionals in the television, film, and music industries. On an institutional level, this organizing primarily takes place through the Guild of Music Supervisors (GMS), a non-profit organization established in 2010 that encourages membership and develops programming and various networking opportunities for folks working in sync.<sup>2</sup> There is also a Canadian equivalent, the Guild of Music Supervisors Canada (or the GMSC), established in

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on key informants, see Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> Two of the interviewees for this project are heavily involved with their respective Guilds, and were thus able to connect me with even more resources. Lindsay Wolfington, based out of Los Angeles, serves on the board of the GMS, and Dondrea Erauw, a Canadian music supervisor also living in LA, is connected with the CGMS and one of the primary organizers for the inaugural *Sound + Vision* sync conference, which ran from November 26-30, 2020.

2016, and a UK and European Guild of Music Supervisors, founded the following year in 2017. The fact that these groups were founded so recently speaks to the ongoing push to clarify the boundaries of and provide institutional legitimacy to what has historically been a misunderstood and underappreciated aspect of televisual media-making. In the absence of physical events and production schedules in the midst of COVID-related closures, various Guilds spent much of 2020 organizing virtual seminars; the GMSC even held a four-day virtual sync conference in November 2020, featuring free virtual sessions on everything from scene analysis to networking, and including an introductory panel session pointedly titled, “So You Want to Be a Music Supervisor?” Along with my one-on-one interviews, I attended several of these virtual events, and draw on those conversations and experiences here as well.

### *TV Histories*

Music has always played a key role in the construction and consumption of television. In stark contrast to media lineages that hail the rise of MTV in 1981 as the start of this intimate relationship, according to Murray Forman, music has been “essential to the character and success of television” since the 1940s (2002, 249). In television’s early days, music and musicians provided necessary “utility value;” radio programs and big band performances were translated — or “remediated” — more or less verbatim for broadcast via the emerging medium (David and Bolter 1999; Forman 2002, 250). Network executives in these early days often emphasized ‘good’ or ‘quality’ music over lowbrow fare “commonly associated with jukeboxes and jazz clubs” — a racialized as well as classed taxonomy (Forman 2002, 259). The early days of television also saw a growing recognition among producers and musicians of the opportunity to use this emerging medium to promote new talent, new material, and effectively use television as a tool to shape the tastes and listening habits of a whole new generation (Forman 2002, 259). By

the 1960s, the role of music on television — and, perhaps even more interestingly, the emergence of *music television* in the form of programs such as “The Ed Sullivan Show” (CBS, 1948-1971) and “American Bandstand” (ABC, 1952-1989) — was swept up in debates around emergent youth subcultures preoccupied with rock, rebellion, and authenticity. Despite the fact that rock and roll was never exempt from commercialism, argues feminist music scholar Norma Coates, the popular histories of this era of music frame it as wholly separate from the shallow, vapid consumerism that television represented. For rock and its attendant youth cultures to succeed, writes Coates, “television was discursively constructed as representing the worst of commercial, mass culture [and] television’s presentation of rock and roll in the late 1950s [...] was blamed for commercializing, trivializing, and feminizing the rock and roll of that era” (Coates 2002, 30). Many contemporary analyses continue to reify this binary, ignoring the entangled histories of rock music and television and reproducing dominant rock mythologies that tout this ‘classic’ era of rock music as taking place entirely beyond the purview of mainstream media.<sup>3</sup> Only recently have music scholars such as Simon Frith (2002) and Coates (2002; 2007) begun to write around the less popular truth — that exposure via television played a central role in promoting rock’s growing acceptance as a legitimate form of popular culture.

The positioning of television as a feminizing contaminant threatening the purity of masculine rock music (and its audiences) is rooted in television’s association with women, domestic spaces, and the commercialism associated with both. According to Lynn Spigel, women have been systematically marginalized in television history, cast as simple “receivers” of

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<sup>3</sup> This bifurcation is complicated by the fact that the audiences of these early forms of music television were also feminized and stigmatized, as in Coates’ writing on what she calls “teenybopper television” and the displaced abjection that fandom of these programs frequently attracted (2002, 238-251). Despite the popularity of these programs and their music, programs such as *The Monkees* were still seen as proof that “bad things [happen] to rock music when teenyboppers are its primary market” (ibid, 246).



the television text (1992, 5) in a discursive move that reflects simplistic understandings of girls and women in domestic space as consumers first and only (McRobbie and Garber 1977, Kearney 2007). The much more complicated reality is that female television viewers have indelibly shaped the style, structure, and sound of television programs; the same conventions that resulted in television being framed as a feminized medium also imbued the medium with a tastemaking capacity that left television, at the end of the twentieth century, in a unique position to impact the masculinist rock cultures that once snubbed it. Early television networks, notes Spigel, were tasked with teaching audiences how to consume television itself (1992, 84). Much of this pedagogical work was done by ensuring that 1) early television felt familiar enough that regular radio listeners could adapt their listening habits to television viewing, and 2) the disruptive potential and newfound “milieu of distraction” (Spigel 1992, 75) that television introduced to domestic spaces was readily absorbed into what television scholar Tania Modleski calls women viewers’ unique “rhythms of reception” (1983). Modleski’s work has inspired other television scholars, such as Rick Altman, to argue that television soundtracks formed an integral, “value-laden” function: identifying the parts of the program that were “sufficiently spectacular” to merit closer attention (1986, 47). This practice of ‘cueing’ viewers, too, was something inherited from radio, a medium that had already successfully integrated into the home and all the domestic rhythms that entailed.

A common anxiety surrounding the early adoption of technology during the 1950s was to what degree the new domestic pastime would distract women from the work required of running a home.<sup>4</sup> Early television programs — and particularly those that ran during the daytime hours, when women viewers were assumed to make up the majority of the audience — responded by

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<sup>4</sup> Similar anxieties (and strategies of curbing them) would re-emerge in the 1990s with the growing popularity of home computers, or PCs. For more on this, see Cassidy 2001.

tailoring programs to fit the daily habits of their female audiences.<sup>5</sup> In addition to adopting formats such as segmented variety shows and shorter, repetitive soap operas that could be consumed in bits and pieces in between other tasks, music and audio were primary ways that feminized daytime television responded to these concerns (Spigel 1992, 78). According to one broadcast network, shows were designed to be appreciated “just as much from listening to them as from watching them,” with audio cues integrated at key points so that viewers could pause other tasks and focus on the program during especially key moments (DuMont, quoted in Spigel 1992, 78; Altman 1986). In this way, the same conditions that gave rise to feminized television genres like the soap opera and sitcom also materially shaped and influenced the centrality of audio and musical cues in this new genre, or “radio with pictures” (Coates 2002, 50). Just as popular music played a critical and necessary role in establishing television conventions during the early days of the medium (Forman 2002), the daily viewing practices of women also played a central role in shaping these developing conventions.<sup>6</sup> An important aspect of teaching early TV audiences how to consume television, it turned out, was teaching them how to *listen* to television in a way that was markedly different and altogether more nuanced than radio listening.

A second powerful trend in television history is the historical multiplication of media goods in homes during the latter half of the twentieth century, fostering a shift from notions of “family television” (Morley 1986) to that of individualized media lifestyles (Flichy 2006) and, for young people, the growing prevalence of “bedroom culture” (McRobbie and Garber 1977, Bovill and Livingstone 2001). According to Livingstone, by the 1990s, “the youth club [had]

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<sup>5</sup> Strategic programming for female listeners continued well into the ‘90s. According to one Times article, as recently as 1998 BBC Radio 1 was careful not to include too high a proportion of “indie groups, rap, jungle, and dance” in their daytime programming for fear of alienating the “housewives” they believed to be listening (cited in Davies 2001).

<sup>6</sup> By their very nature, however, these programming patterns and formats also assumed a narrow vision of what domestic femininity looked like (i.e. white, middle class, married, stay-at-home mothers) that precluded other potential patterns and consumer habits.

closed down and the front room [had] been replaced by a multimedia home and, particularly, a multimedia bedroom” (Livingstone 2007, 306). Alongside a growing bifurcation of public and private media consumption, the power of the teenaged consumer was also gaining steam in the 1980s and 1990s. While earlier television sitcoms had focused more on appealing to the family audience as a whole,<sup>7</sup> in the 1990s the genre came into its own and many existing major American networks (ABC, NBC) honed in on this new demographic, while new networks were created or adapted to cater explicitly to the teenaged consumer (MTV, The WB, Nickelodeon, and the Disney Channel). With this growing focus on teen audiences and the sense that these programs were increasingly being viewed without parental supervision (and the lip service that such an age diverse audience would require), the use of music on television once again experienced a significant shift. Teen programming was rapidly emerging as a space of opportunity for musical discovery — by the early 2000s, young people discovering music via television had become “the new way of the digital age” (Reyes, quoted in Anderson 2014, 120).

Alongside the siloing of teen audiences and the newfound freedoms of teen programming, another important industry shift in the 1990s that laid the groundwork for the emergence of music supervisors as cultural tastemakers had to do with radio. Radio had already undergone intense consolidation in the decades since television had moved into the mainstream, but the 1990s represented a new reckoning for the status of broadcast radio in the United States. *The Telecommunications Act of 1996* (which saw parallels in Canada’s 1991 *Broadcasting Act* and 1993’s *Telecommunications Act*) made it easier to acquire and consolidate radio stations,

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly enough, many of these earlier sitcoms that *did* appeal particularly to younger or teenaged audiences focused explicitly on musical themes. *The Monkees*, which ran from 1966 to 1968 on NBC, follows four young men attempting to make it in a rock band, while *The Partridge Family*, which ran from 1970 to 1974 on ABC, follows a family band consisting of five siblings and their mother (Wikipedia). *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, which ran from 1952 to 1966, also focused heavily on the exploits of rising teen star Ricky Nelson and has been identified by television scholars as one of “the first full-on teen shows” (Ross and Stein, 12).

effectively making it more difficult for artists to find their way onto radio playlists. By lifting ownership caps, these pieces of legislation “paved the way for a series of mergers and acquisitions within the radio industry, [...] reduced the number of station owners, tightened corporate control over radio playlists, and reinforced format radio’s narrow selection of [...] music for inclusion on the airwaves” (Aslinger 2008, 81). At the same time, dedicated music television channels like MTV were turning from video programs to a newfound reliance on lifestyle programs, reducing the number of hours that the channel aired music videos and “largely pushed music videos out of primetime” (ibid). The void where music videos and smaller scale radio stations’ airtime used to be, alongside the rise in teens’ power and autonomy as consumers, therefore effectively positioned teen television as the vehicle of choice for cultural (and, particularly, musical) tastemaking by the late 1990s. The question remained: who or what entity was going to be the first to capitalize upon these conditions?

### ***Music Supervision (What It Is and How It’s Gendered)***

The shifting norms of TV and film production during the 2000s meant that music supervisors played a newly vital role in audiences’ access to and understanding of music, even as the cultural legibility of that role suffered. As a profession, music supervision has been historically disregarded and delegitimated, framed as a “below-the-line” aspect of film and television production (Anderson 2013, 372). Until the late 1990s or early 2000s, music supervision was seen as merely dealing with the management of licensing deals, and supervisors themselves were often treated as something of a necessary evil, “one of the many industrial constraints and encumbrances that potentially conflict with the director’s own artistic agenda” (Smith 2001, 36). According to Jeff Smith in “Taking Music Supervisors Seriously” (2001, 125), the role of music supervisors was often framed as administrative (feminized) labour:

Margot Core (supervisor of *Big Night* and *Mickey Blue Eyes*) told me that several directors with whom she worked regarded her as little more than a clerk or administrative assistant, whose only task was to fulfill their will regarding the kind of music that appears in their film.

The expertise and skill this role actually requires — TV scholar Tim Anderson describes it as “one part legal advisor, one part script analysis, one part music fan, [and] one part broker” (2013, 373) — is obscured behind the language of administration. While it can be tempting to frame women’s relationships with technology as innate, this explanation obscures the reality that women have historically been chosen for technically demanding jobs like telephone operators because they were assumed to have “the necessary patient temperament, dexterity, and willingness to work for cheap wages that this occupation necessitated” (Shade 2002, 17). The feminization of certain areas of the labour force quickly turns these fields into “female job ghettos” (ibid, 19). Feminist media histories tell us that sites of gendered labour are often overlooked because they exist behind the scenes, even as they serve key functions in the development of technology and media, from early computer programming to the microchip (Light 1999; Nakamura 2014; Keilty 2018) They also, however, constitute “inventive sites” where new and initially overwhelming technologies can be tested and adapted, “sites of infiltration, appropriation, and resourcefulness for marginalized users” who sneak in without raising suspicion because of these positions’ assumed unimportance or dearth of power (McKinney 2020, 11-16). While there was no widely collected data on such statistics from earlier eras, music supervision today is one of very few roles in film and television industries with acceptable (not yet great, but acceptable) rates of representation across genders rather than solely dominated by cis men.<sup>8</sup> It is this tangle of stereotypes and misunderstood responsibilities,

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<sup>8</sup> According to the annual “Celluloid Ceiling” report, which has tracked women’s employment on top grossing films since 1998, women accounted for 43% of music supervisors working on the top 500 films of 2019 (the first year the report collected data on music supervision), compared to — for instance — 7% of female composers working on

then, that helped prime the field of music supervision as an inventive site for the unprecedented use of music in teen television at the turn of the millennium.

Not only that, but the creativity and music fandom that supervisors often channel through this role is all but erased. Despite the legal expertise needed for licensing, the heart of the role is still, according to Wolfington, wanting to share music. “The feeling behind [it] is when you’re like, ‘I have this great song I’m going to put on a mix and share,’” she says. “That’s where the motivation comes from.” Supervision and other music industry jobs also appeal to people intent on making music their life, but not willing to commit to musicianship per se. “I was kind of like, if I’m not going to tour in a band for the rest of my life, I should probably find some type of job that’s within music, because what else am I going to do?” notes Dondrea Erauw, a Canadian music supervisor who moved to LA to work in sync. “It’s like one my one true love.” Erauw continues to play guitar and record music, but even supervisors who are not explicitly musical often feel a similar draw. Jumi Akinfenwa is a UK-based music supervisor who works primarily in advertising and TV. “I don’t think I really had any interests that I really, really loved in the same way,” she reflects. “I wasn’t necessarily tangibly musical, so I was like, okay, how can I do this? So it was just a case of like [...] growing up in the mid-2000s [and] just like access to resources and the Internet [sic] and stuff.” The 2000s, in addition to providing unprecedented amounts of information via the internet, also provided burgeoning music workers with a glut of incredible soundtracks to inspire them. Erauw recalls watching *The O.C.* (Fox, 2003-2007) religiously every week:

I think it was Thursdays, it aired. Or maybe it was Tuesdays. But the next day, I would go on this website that they had, [and] it would literally just list every song and band that

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those same films. Interestingly, 76% of the top 500 films had no female music supervisors at all — a discrepancy in numbers that points to music supervision teams where male supervisors were also present. The report does not include information on race, sexuality, ethnicity, or any other identity markers other than gender, nor does it allow for the supervisors surveyed to identify themselves as nonbinary or genderqueer (Lauzen 2020).

was in the previous night's episode. [I] lived in a small town and didn't have access to go to record stores. But I downloaded music and, you know, I had MP3 players that could hold seventeen songs. I would rotate the songs based on what was in the episodes, and just fall in love with the music.

Erauw still maintains a playlist of contemporary songs that remind her of *The O.C.* soundtrack — a testament to the staying power of both teenaged fandom and Patsavas' soundtrack. Many of the younger supervisors I spoke with identified 2000s franchises or films that sparked their interest in supervision; the most common by far was either *The O.C.* or *Almost Famous* (Crowe 2000), and when answers deviated from these more popular answers it was acknowledged.<sup>9</sup> “I was interested in music supervision starting with *Gilmore Girls*,” notes Mikaila Simmons, a Toronto-based supervisor. “Which is very rare for somebody my age.” The overarching theme remains, however, which is that quite often, for young female supervisors, the mid-2000s were when their interest and conviction around working with music was sparked by an incredible soundtrack.

By the late 1990s, the music industry saw licensing as a revenue stream that could compensate for declining CD sales and lost profits caused by downloading and piracy, exacerbated with the launch of Napster in 1999.<sup>10</sup> As the only record company with an associated American television network, Warner Brothers and the WB had unparalleled access to teen viewers, and was one of the first major networks to use ‘sync’ — the process of licensing and syncing songs for broadcast — to cross-promote musicians on WB franchises, and vice versa (Aslinger 2008, 81). This move also saved a lot of money. According to one report, when programs such as *Dawson's Creek* used recordings from the Warner Brothers catalogue, the

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<sup>9</sup> Ironically, *Almost Famous* director Cameron Crowe is outspoken about his dislike of working with music supervisors.

<sup>10</sup> As Abigail de Kosnik explores in her 2010 white paper “Piracy is the Future of Television,” file-sharing technologies and media piracy were, for many, actually more effective and streamlined than their legal counterparts in the earliest days of legal, internet-based streaming services.

show saved “anywhere from three to ten thousand dollars in licensing fees per song” (Ostrow 2000, in Aslinger 2008, 81). Teen shows on the WB network, like *Felicity*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Dawson’s Creek*, were therefore early adopters of this move towards using sync to introduce teen audiences to new music, effectively consolidating its image as a network for young, cutting-edge viewers while drawing on in-house licensing opportunities. Due to industry-wide shifts and the new prominence of media conglomerates, a renewed relationship between the visual and the musical was effectively ‘baked into’ the formative years of teen programming, setting a precedent for prolific music supervisors and soundtracks yet to come.

Music supervisors balance commercial and creative objectives, “acting as mediator between multiple industries with sometimes competing interests” (Klein and Meier 2017, 4). In this way, the role of music supervisor has been subject to many of the same evolutions and tensions as indie music itself, namely, the ongoing tension between the authenticity conferred by certain industry choices (i.e. not associating oneself or one’s art with capitalist/commercial interests, thereby retaining artistic freedom) and the reality of having to earn a living. This question of who gets to lay claim to creativity and authenticity is also central. As cultural intermediaries, music supervisors perform a lot of invisible labour — work that “supports the [project] in a way that’s so integrated people don’t take particular notice of it” (Crisafulli 2007, quoted in Anderson 2014, 129). Despite what we know about music’s affective impacts, then, much of the creativity and credit for a project’s emotional tone and audiences’ connections to it may not end up attributed to the music supervisor, but rather land on the project’s director or producers.

A useful framework for understanding the gendered dynamics of creativity at work in television culture comes from fan studies, in thinking through the differences between how we



frame male and female fans' creative labour. Fans of all kinds have long existed in the cultural imaginary as pathologized figures, failing at gender, sexuality, and race in a multitude of ways and experiencing an excess of affect and attachment to the texts of which they are fans (Jensen 1992; Stanfill 2011; Felschow 2010). Also well-documented are the creative practices of fans — and girls in particular — who express their fannish attachments via creative practices, or fanworks, which range in form from fan writing (sometimes called fanfiction or simply 'fic') to fan art to re-editing sound and images to create videos, which frequently include music.<sup>11</sup> As fan studies has become an established subfield of cultural studies, the gendered distinctions of these various creative practices that infuse fan spaces have also been well documented (Hellekson 2009; de Kosnik 2012; Turk 2014; Flegel and Roth 2014). One trend that has emerged out of this literature is that female fans are less likely to monetize their creative labour and are instead prone to building gift economies within fan communities and building nurturing connections and relationships with like-minded fans. Like many attempts to categorize and taxonomize fandom, this binary is overly simplistic, ignoring the fact that all genders have certainly sought community in fandom, and all genders have historically sought to monetize fandom. However, it does provide a sense of the history and fannish habitus underlying a figure that, I argue, plays a key role in the shifting cultural legitimation of music supervisors during the 2000s, and the ways in which the role continues to be misunderstood today: the fanboy auteur.

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<sup>11</sup> There is an interestingly gendered dimension, as well, to the various ways that fans engage with visuals and music in fandom. While the majority of fan-edited videos set to music (or “vidding” practices) take place largely among feminized and/or queer fandoms, the practice of manipulating video game AI to record certain storylines, called “machinima,” is largely headed up by male fans/gamers (Hill 2009; Jones 2011). According to Robert Jones (2011), male gamer’s proclivity for this type of fannish behaviour is framed as amateur “tinkering” similar to amateur radio enthusiasts (see Chapter 1 for more on homosocial ‘tinkering’ culture), while similar activities in girls are framed as a result of affective investments in characters, despite the fact that both practices require similar levels of expertise with audio and video editing.

“By considering the multiple incorporations and resistances that occur within fandom and studies of fandom,” writes Suzanne Scott, “We can begin to understand how these forms of incorporation or resistance are impacting discussions of the media’s representation and/or pathologization of fans, and the commercialization of their labour” (2011, 19). Scott was the first fan studies scholar to use the term ‘fanboy auteur’ to describe the male creatives who become associated with popular, often transmedia franchises. In television, examples of fanboy auteurs include Brian Fuller (*Hannibal* and *American Gods*), David Beinoff and D.B. Weiss (*Game of Thrones*), and Steven Moffat (*Sherlock*, *Doctor Who*). The implicit assumption with these creatives is that, because of their history of fandom and investment in a ‘good’ or ‘accurate’ adaptation of the text (as Naja Later observes, these “promoted fanboys” are key figures in serialized adaptations of literary texts), fans are more likely to trust and identify with their choices (Later 2018, 536). The fanboy auteur’s liminal positionality is often strategic; when this kind of auteur interacts with fans, he attempts to “subvert or overlook the perceived power differential” between official creator and fan and as a result is often shielded from the critique and commentary that befall creators whose fans do not perceive as having the same investment in the text (Later 2018, 536).

Along with adaptations, another trend tied into the rise of fanboy auteurship in television has been the emergence of prestige television. Brett Mills is one of several television scholars to make the link between the cinematic and legitimation, noting that, “It’s clear that the term ‘cinematic’ is one associated with hierarchical ideas of quality, and is perceived to be a compliment when appropriated for television” (2013, 63). The auteur in television is often positioned as a ‘showrunner,’ a nebulous and technically meaningless moniker that reframes or

condenses the roles of producer and/or writer into a kind of “storyteller-in-chief” (Newman and Levine 2012, 40). According to Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine (2012, 38):

The showrunner is potentially an *auteur* [...] whose presence in cultural discourses functions to produce authority for the forms with which he is identified. The rise to prominence of television *auteurs* and of authorship discourses surrounding them functions to distinguish certain kinds of television from others and, as in cinema, to promote *auteur* productions as culturally legitimate.

In other words, as television critic Emily Nussbaum has noted, even as television started getting better, “people tended to praise it by praising things that made it seem unlike TV [...] to other art forms that they considered meaningful” (in Reese 2019). Two salient and related conclusions can be drawn from these discussions of television auteurship. First, the role of showrunner or auteur is almost always masculinized — prolific female showrunners such as Shonda Rimes or Rachel Bloom are hardly ever elevated to similar cultural acclaim, and prestige television is constructed as a heavily masculinized genre. As Sarah Marshall notes in her discussion of *Girls* (HBO, 2012-2017) and the show’s role in redefining “the kinds of lives [prestige television] can make us care about,” one of the hallmarks of prestige television with male protagonists is its focus on messy interiorities. There is a reason, after all, that the early days of HBO are remembered for *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), which fit this mold of tortured, troubled masculinity, rather than *Sex and the City* (1998-2004), a show that hinges on the type of emotional frankness and interpersonal relationships Marshall argues prevents so many women-fronted franchises from registering as prestige television.<sup>12</sup> And second, the framing of these fanboy or promoted auteurs is one that

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, a persistent conspiracy theory about *Sex and the City* recasts the show firmly in the tradition of more ‘traditional’ prestige television. The theory, which Sarah Jessica Parker (Carrie) herself speaks to in a 2019 interview, supposes that Carrie’s three best friends — Charlotte, Miranda, and Samantha — are imagined characters that only exist for the purpose of exploring Carrie’s own interiority via her infamous newspaper column (Salemme 2019). While I can’t help but wonder how it might have changed the reception and reputation of the show if this twist actually appeared in canon, the fact remains that *SATC* continues to be written off as frivolous, feminized, ‘guilty pleasure’ television (see Emily Nussbaum’s landmark 2013 *New Yorker* essay, “Difficult Women,” for more).

departs significantly from previous understandings of television’s creative process as “collective, and thus relatively anonymous” (Later 2018, 534). As previously noted, the convention of imagining collective and community-based fannish behaviours and creative practices as mostly or exclusively female is problematic. However, it’s also no accident that the elevation of male showrunners as auteurs coincided with a rise in prestige television that seemingly reinforces the lowbrow quality of more ‘traditional’ TV programming.<sup>13</sup> This shift further occluded the cultural legibility of those ‘below-the-line’ roles that continue to shape much of what we see (and hear) on screen.<sup>14</sup>

Resisting the tendency to view television production through the lens of auteurship allows for more complex models of creativity and creative community, one that reflects Sherry Turkle’s notions of soft mastery. Turkle defines “soft mastery” as that which involves working closely and ‘learning’ the ins and outs of particularly complex systems of bricolage; this “softness” is often associated with the unscientific and the feminine, even as it proves useful for processes like negotiation and relational understanding (Turkle 1996, 56). According to Turkle, “the term ‘soft mastery’ goes along with seeing negotiation, relationship, and attachment as cognitive virtues” (ibid). Production roles “do not necessarily [require] any technical skills (e.g. playing a musical instrument, or using a camera) — rather, their valuable skills are intellectual ones (understanding audiences, managing teams, a familiarity with copyright laws)” (Lewandowski 2010, 866). The work of music supervision thus requires a certain degree of

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<sup>13</sup> As Sarah Marshall has quipped of the reclamatory or recuperative power of male auteurs in her discussion of the initial wave of prestige television on HBO: “*Deadwood*’s David Milch and *The Wire*’s David Simon and *The Sopranos*’ David Chase — all the Davids who make it OK to love TV” (2017, 50).

<sup>14</sup> A similar phenomenon plays out in the tension between music supervision and other music industry roles, such as A&R (Artists and Repertoire) managers. Responsible for talent scouting and the artistic development of artists, A&R frequently overshadows other aspects of music work due to the inherent “glamour” of the role. According to a recent article written by Jumi Akinfenwa, one of the supervisors I interviewed, “sync has historically been in the background of the label infrastructure [...] it’s pretty low down in the hierarchy of music jobs” (2020).

affective intelligence. In addition to ongoing bricolage work required by music supervision — the wearing of many hats alluded to by Anderson, above — music properties exist as “thick entities” in their own right, imbued with emotional and narrative complexities that require a certain level of sensitivity, in addition to the financial, legal, and social considerations that inform supervisors’ day-to-day (Anderson 2014, 129). The affective dimensions of supervision work simultaneously preclude easy cultural legibility by those beyond the industry and also — as I discuss further below — invite appropriation and entitlement from showrunners and other, ‘above-the-line’ creative roles with a fundamental misunderstanding of all that it entails.

The emergent figure of the television auteur is closely entwined with this question of who can more or less easily trade on their fan identity for professional gain. As Scott notes, male fans often seem to “[enjoy] the spoils of convergence culture” (2011, 47) more readily, while female creatives tend to occupy less celebrated roles in participatory cultural practices, whether fannish or based in the media industries. These tensions between visibility and cultural capital are common threads in much of the literature on cultural intermediaries, dating all the way back to the term’s first appearance in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. “The charismatic ideology of ‘creation,’” writes Bourdieu, “directs the gaze towards the apparent producer – painter, composer, writer – and prevents us from asking who has created this ‘creator’” (1996, 167). While subsequent research on intermediaries does raise questions around how production and consumption are mediated, rarely does the conversation turn to an explicit discussion of who has access to more or less cultural capital on the basis of gender, race, or any other factor (Negus 2002; Nixon and du Gay 2002; Molloy and Larner 2010; van Altena 2014). The irony, of course, is that this question of who (or what) “creates the creator” remains relatively unconnected to qualitative research grounded in these fields. Despite the fact that music supervision has

historically been a feminized and misunderstood production role — or perhaps *because* of this historical anonymity — there continues to be a void of research on music supervision grounded in feminist cultural studies analysis that takes into account the ever-present, structuring logics of fandom, legitimacy, and authenticity.

### ***Cultural Legibility and Legitimation***

Organizations like the GMS continue to push for institutional recognition of music supervisors. Even within the industry, however, monumental wins like the addition of an Emmy’s category to recognize outstanding music supervision does little to mitigate the ongoing work of education and legitimation. “You often find yourself playing teacher a lot,” notes Danielle Lindy, head of music supervision at Toronto-based Vapor Music. “It’s still a niche industry, to an extent.” Eligh shares in her sentiment, noting that her job with a popular record label becomes much easier when there is a music supervisor on the team — ordinarily she has to “educate film producers” about the parameters and limits of sync. In every awards cycle since the Emmy’s category was first introduced in 2017, there have been showrunners and producers who have nominated themselves for the music supervision award, a trend that multiple interviewees noted in our conversations. As Erauw notes:

Showrunners are realizing that this is a category that they can technically submit for because they’re helping make creative decisions when it comes to music. [But] we’re still the ones helping with all the clearances and the budgeting, and everything else that is involved under the supervision umbrella. So it can be hard when that happens, because you don’t see a showrunner taking a composer credit or a makeup and costume credit. So it’s definitely—it hurts a little.

As Erauw points out, this question of entitlement is also tied into how music fandom is leveraged into expertise. “Everybody loves music, and everybody has an opinion on music,” reflects Wolfington. “[But] we’re proud of what we do, and we’re proud of the title of music supervisor... it’s more than just taste.” Simmons cites multiple instances where producers and

filmmakers have approached her, wanting to know more about the specifics of licensing, and quickly been overwhelmed:

Especially when one of the showrunners or creatives is a self-proclaimed ‘music lover,’ they—you will always get somebody in the higher tier of creative decisions that loves music and loves like deep cuts of Velvet Underground and Joy Division and all of these amazing artists that *sound* independent when you list them out. But independent music actually—like the genre is different than the reality. [A lot of these artists] are actually signed to major labels. So it’s not as easy as one might think to [navigate the licensing process and] get the rights.

Supervisors’ expertise continues to come up against these discourses of auteurship, even as sync and supervision gain cultural recognition via mechanisms such as awards and industry organizing. As the quotes above allude, a lot of this entitlement seems to be wrapped up in this notion that music — unlike costume design or special effects — is seen as more accessible knowledge. This shift from a feminized, administrative field to one that male showrunners are eager to infiltrate via their own fandom (but still, notably, without shouldering the more technical and bureaucratic aspects of the job) speaks to how, even in the face of monumental shifts in the field, the cultural legibility of sync and supervision continues to be tempered by gendered expectations of expertise.

### ***Conclusions***

Despite the ongoing disconnect between the tastemaking power of music supervisors and their institutional or cultural recognition as such, the legacy of 2000s soundtracks and the female supervisors who defined the field lives on. “Lindsay [Wolfington] and Alex [Patsavas] literally [paved] the way for younger people like me to be able to be like, *I can do that*,” notes Erauw. “Looking back on it now, it’s like... the people who were involved in shaping the soundtracks that [were] my life, and I’m sure your life and everyone else’s who was in our age group, you know... were women. And that’s pretty amazing.” These legacies are tangible reminders that

representation and mentorship are key strategies in undermining those patriarchal logics that continue to structure the entertainment and media industries. Erauw continues:

I looked up to them without even knowing it at the time. I found a submission email to Lindsay that I wrote to her before I went into college, where I wanted to send her my music so that she could maybe use it on her shows. It was like construction paper [with] my band's name on it, this like handwritten note on the back, [and] this CD. I found it at my parent's house last Christmas, and I sent her a text with a photo of it. I was like, 'I don't think you ever saw this, but I sent this in the mail to you when I was like seventeen or eighteen.' [laughs] And now I get to see her at awards shows and whenever we get together for the Guild [and] it's just really cool that I get to call her a peer in some sense now. It's really special.

The ongoing push to make music supervisors' work legible paves the way in real and measurable ways for the field to diversify and grow. As Akinfenwa points out, questions of visibility are also central to increasing numbers of Black supervisors. "Obviously I know that representation is really only a start, and just having someone there doesn't mean that they'll necessarily advocate for [others]," notes Akinfenwa. "But I think visibility definitely plays a huge part. Even in [the] short space of time I've been doing it, it's definitely become a lot more visible as a job, and I think it will only increase." With more cultural understanding of sync and music supervisors' role comes the possibility of even more representation in the field.

Female music supervisors in the 2000s era were able to capitalize on their role as tastemakers in the burgeoning teen consumer market, forcing a perceptible shift in the relationship that music (and particularly alternative or indie rock) was understood to have with mainstream teen culture and girl culture in particular. Music supervision as a field is one that has been historically delegitimized and feminized, which — coupled with the framing of fandom as driven by affect alone — leads to an assumption that any music lover can do the job. The ongoing push for industry recognition, led by working music supervisors and organizations such as the Guilds, has won a number of broader bids for visibility over the past decade, including new category at the Emmy Awards for best television music supervision. The boundaries and



definitions of the role, however, continue to be in flux. Here, I have called for more scholarly attention to the gendered histories of television and the fraught relationship between ‘good’ or ‘cool’ music and mainstream television that music supervisors such as Alexandra Patsavas and Lindsay Wolfington had to overcome. As my research with a younger generation of working supervisors shows, there is also a gap in research around the lasting legacies of these prolific music supervisors and the influential teen media they worked on. The relatively recent phenomenon of showrunners appropriating music supervision credits is linked inextricably to notions of music fandom as expertise and is, as I have argued here, symptomatic of a larger refusal to take women’s musical expertise and girl culture texts (and, by extension, the people who consume, enjoy, and are inspired by these texts) seriously, or as capable of cultural importance.

## Chapter Three

### PLAYLIST

This playlist offers a selection of songs from the soundtracks of *Garden State* (2004), *Juno* (2007), *Twilight* (2008), and *Jennifer's Body* (2009) to highlight the ways in which indie music supported — and in some cases complicated — the cultural reception of indie crossover films of the era.

#### 1. New Slang — The Shins (2001)

The Shins' debut album had already racked up several years' worth of accolades by the time that Zach Braff decided to feature "New Slang" on the compilation soundtrack for *Garden State* (2004), which Braff has described as "a mix CD of the music scoring [his] life" at the time he was writing the screenplay (IGN 2004). In an early scene from the film, Sam (Natalie Portman) passes Andrew (played by Braff) a headset with "New Slang" playing and solemnly tells him, "You gotta hear this one song — it'll change your life, I swear." Following the success of both the film and its Grammy-winning soundtrack, The Shins saw sales for their first two albums double to sell more than twice what they had prior to the film's debut. "Almost overnight," wrote Robert Levine of *SPIN*, "The Shins became indie-rock icons."

#### 2. Orange Sky — Alexi Murdoch (2004)

If a case can be made for a song that haunts early 2000s screen cultures, this might be it. Featuring prominently in *Garden State* (2004), "Orange Sky" was not able to be included on the official soundtrack as the rights were owned by Fox's *The O.C.* The song was included in episodes of *Dawson's Creek* along with *The O.C.* and — in true Alex Patsavas fashion — a Kat Cunning cover is also included on the soundtrack for *Looking for Alaska* (2019). I have a much higher tolerance for this early 2000s sync hit than "New

Slang,” probably due to the fact that my first encounter with the song was not until 2009’s *Away We Go*, a ‘quirky’ indie crossover romcom starring a still relatively low profile John Krasinski opposite a pre-*Bridesmaids* Maya Rudolph. All of this is really testament to the mass appeal of a specific brand of light indie rock at a time when film and TV were working to appeal to indie cultural sensibilities, and honestly? If the opening bars of certain songs give some of us visceral flashbacks to low-rise skinny jeans and stiff, over-styled sidebangs... they’ve done their job well.

### 3. **Flightless Bird, American Mouth — Iron & Wine (2007)**

There are a number of songs I could have picked off the *Twilight* soundtracks to showcase their location at the precise intersection of girl culture and indie rock culture. We could talk about the two songs that Paramore wrote specifically for the first film. We could talk about the intense backlash from Muse fans who saw the *Twilight* audience as contaminating their fandom from the instant the needle dropped and girl fans had the audacity to *like* “Supermassive Black Hole” (see Williams 2013). We could even unpack the song Robert Pattinson (who played Edward Cullen) co-wrote and recorded for the first movie’s soundtrack, and the ever-blurring line between film soundtracks and the actors who star in them. In the end, however, Iron and Wine won out because of this song’s placement in the final, twinkling prom scene from the first film, where there was real space for the lyrics to swell and land with teenaged viewers. As Chloe Gilke has written on the cultural impact of the *Twilight* soundtracks, the inclusion of established, indie artists like Iron & Wine (who were also a cornerstone of soundtracks like *Garden State*) did more than just introduce girl audiences to new artists: it made us feel welcome.

“Those extra songs were a nod to me,” she notes. “*You’re not who they imagine when they think of indie, but we’re glad you’re here.*”

#### **4. My Rollercoaster — Kimya Dawson (2006)**

Kimya Dawson was, in many ways, synonymous with the sound of *Juno* (2007) from the start. According to director Jason Reitman, the production team asked actor Elliot Page what kind of music Juno would listen to. “[He] said The Moldy Peaches. [He] went on my computer, played the songs, and I fell in love with it” (Lucy 2007). Dawson went on to contribute five solo songs to the soundtrack along with two from her project Antsy Pants and one from the Moldy Peaches; composer Mateo Messina also based the film’s score off of Dawson’s songs. Their persona as a performer also works to shore up the authenticity of *Juno*’s narrative — Reitman’s original idea for a glam rock soundtrack was ultimately canned on the basis of being too inauthentic, and *Village Voice* music critic Rob Harvilla (2008) has noted that Dawson has a demeanor that is “sheepish and guileless and awkward in a way that you can’t really fake.” Beyond its indie folk sonic qualities, punk scholar David Verbuč has also noted how the lyrics of “My Rollercoaster” reflect the translocal politics of punk touring that often see indie acts crashing on friends’ floors and relying on an ever-growing network of *every kid and every grown up booking house shows in their town.*

#### **5. I’m Not Going to Teach Your Boyfriend How to Dance With You — Black Kids (2008)**

In keeping with the fact that *Jennifer’s Body* (2009) borrows its name from an alternative rock song, the soundtrack for the film is a mix of late 2000s indie rock, emo, and pop-punk, including this track from Florida-based band Black Kids. One of the very few indie

rock acts of the era to feature a Black vocalist (another prominent example being, of course, Kimya Dawson and the Moldy Peaches), the Black Kids received national attention and a flurry of music media coverage after a breakout performance at Athens Popfest in Athens, Georgia, in 2007. The song is notable for its context in the film; the line *you are the girl I've been dreaming of, ever since I was a little girl* plays over slow-mo footage of Jennifer (Megan Fox) and Needy Lesnicki (Amanda Seyfried) staring at each other across a crowded pep rally early in the film and, in many ways, sets up the complex (and notably queer) dynamics of their friendship that caused such controversy in the film's marketing and eventual reception by audiences.

#### **6. New Slang — Vallis Alps (2017)**

As the comments section of the original YouTube video suggest, Australian duo Vallis Alps took a risk covering a song with such intense associations. It's a risk that paid off; singer Parissa Tosif's vocals ring with a clarity and a sureness that is largely missing from the Shins' original. This particular cover dropped in 2017, when the cultural standing of *Garden State* and its role as a kind of shorthand for the self-serious, overly twee indie culture of the early 2000s was already relatively well-established. I do wonder if the reception to Vallis Alps' cover might have been less friendly if they had released it ten years prior, before the distance from peak indie defensiveness stretched to something a little more comfortable. But mostly, I'm just grateful for the introduction of a drum machine and the sound of something a little different.

## Manic Pixie Indie Boys: Notes on Indie Quirk and Camp

### CHAPTER THREE

I said *many* dumb things in the early 2000s. But I still distinctly remember referring to *Garden State* as ‘generation-defining.’ It’s by far the dumbest thing I’ve ever said.

— Michael Hobbes, *You’re Wrong About* podcast (June 8, 2020)

The first decade of the new millennium was the last decade in which teen media was really concentrated in TV and film, before social media sites and streaming platforms rose up to dictate what and how we watch. Like the rise of teen television and teen sitcoms, the prominence and influence of teen films of this era were brought about by a confluence of industry and cultural contexts. And while the narratives and aesthetics of this era of film have not aged particularly gracefully — like the co-hosts of the *You’re Wrong About* podcast, quoted above, I frequently look back on texts from this era and cringe — there is also no denying this era of film’s prominent role in mainstreaming the many hallmarks of indie music culture: masculinized intellectualism, gatekeeping “good” media from undeserving (i.e. feminized) audiences, tensions between artifice and authenticity, and conflating exclusivity with cultural value.

Something happened in the 2000s. Teen films perfected the art of tucking music into the gaps of their narratives, based in the more traditional teen film themes of family conflict, the dramas of coming of age, and romcom fare. Music might not have been the centerpiece of these films (as with, for example, 2000’s epic *Almost Famous*). Rather, by the end of the decade, music and music culture existed as just another character — a taken for granted part of the diegesis, adding and building to films’ aesthetic and narrative worlds. This ubiquitous, mundane music culture in 2000s teen film is almost always rock or indie rock oriented, communicating important genre distinctions and ideas to young audiences around what kind of music scenes they should be aspiring to. In 2003’s *Freaky Friday*, Anna’s (Lindsay Lohan) role in her rock band Pink Slip provides plenty of comedic material when an ill-fated wish causes her to swap

places with her mother (Jamie Lee Curtis), who is left unsure of how to play her teen's instrument. The 1976 version of the film, starring Barbara Harris and Jodie Foster, contained similar comedic scenes of a mother trapped in her daughter's body and struggling to conceal the body swap at school marching band practice. The change in musical styles for the 2003 film, from school band to Riot Grrrl-inspired garage rock, suggests an awareness of the shifting contours of teen girl musical tastes and the way that this music fits into young adult lives.

*Freaky Friday* is one of the few teen films of the decade in which girl rock musicians take center, or indeed, any kind of stage. More common are narratives that depict teen girls as dedicated fans (2004's *Confessions of a Teenage Drama Queen*, another Lohan film), the love interests of more serious teen boy musicians (2010's *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*), or with family connections to the music industry and eager to shirk that legacy (2008's *Nick & Norah's Infinite Playlist*). One notable exception is *Josie and the Pussycats* (2001), which centers on a female band who are signed to pop label MegaRecords and subsequently find themselves in the middle of a poorly executed conspiracy to deliver subliminal messaging through popular music.<sup>1</sup> The movie's framing of female musicians — and pop music more generally — as pawns of a broader consumer culture reflects rockist attitudes that devalue pop as low value drivel (Cook 2001; Wald 2002). The binary that emerges between rock as a space for masculinist art and pop as feminized, frivolous entertainment is reinforced, to a certain extent, by *Josie's* framing of the band's struggle to expose MegaRecords' schemes. The film ultimately reinforces the narrative, supported by many of the music-adjacent teen films of the 2000s, that mainstream music, labels, and the pop sound are inferior to more indie, rockist modes of achieving success and 'doing'

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<sup>1</sup> The singing vocals for Rachael Lee Cook, who plays the titular role in *Josie and the Pussycats*, are provided by Kay Hanley, the former lead singer of Letters to Cleo. Although Letters to Cleo broke up in 2000, the band appeared in the 1999 movie *10 Things I Hate About You* and contributed several songs to the film's popular soundtrack, gesturing towards a clear lineage of music in 1990s/2000s teen girl film.

music. In *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, for instance, Scott's band Sex Bob-Omb competes in a local battle of the band competition run by record executive Gideon Graves, who functions as a kind of avatar for the evils of pop music's corporate interests.<sup>2</sup> In a parallel plot to *Josie*, the climax of *Scott Pilgrim* sees Scott face off against Gideon (and, along the way, reveal that he has implanted love interest Ramona Flowers with a mind control device) and ultimately defeat him, along with the label's ulterior motives to exploit local indie bands. Thus, while both *Josie* and *Scott Pilgrim* feature girls playing music, they also ultimately serve to reinforce the binary between masculinist indie cultures and feminized popular ones — both of these films have found cult success and are now considered defining, popular texts of the 2000s.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I offer an analysis of 2000s films that critique the visibility of these hegemonic readings of cultural hierarchies. While many 2000s cultural texts were invested in these tired binaries of indie and mainstream, masculine authenticity and feminine artifice, I posit that a smaller wave of films also contested it. By offering a reading of one film that set up these more dominant tropes and two that contest it, I argue that the 2000s saw an emerging on-screen critique of indie rock subcultures and — furthermore — a point of identification for girl audiences who had previously experienced incessant gatekeeping and been discouraged from accessing these same cultures. With this in mind, I ask: what are the evolving pedagogical functions of 2000s films that say things about music taste cultures? How do we reconcile the documented derision of girl culture (Wald 2002, Genz and Brabon 2009, Swindle 2011) with girl audiences' consistently excellent taste and these films' transformative potential? And how might

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<sup>2</sup> There is also the character of Scott's ex-girlfriend, pop star Envy Adams, who is portrayed less than kindly and as somewhat of a sellout.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, neither film saw huge box office success, with film critic Robert Ebert awarding *Josie and the Pussycats* only a half star and disparaging that “*Josie and the Pussycats* are not dumber than the Spice Girls, but they're as dumb as the Spice Girls, which is dumb enough.”



the concept of ‘indie camp’ open up a space for understanding teen girls as astute and critical audiences, in blatant opposition to popular notions of this group as cultural dupes (Adorno and Horkheimer 1982; Cook 2001)? To answer these questions, I examine the industry positioning and reception of three films from this era — *Garden State* (2004), *Juno* (2007), and *Jennifer’s Body* (2009), chosen over more mainstream teen films because 1) they exist at the intersection of indie and mainstream film and therefore seem to have more to say about indie culture, and 2) they still share many of the themes identified by teen film scholars as being integral to the genre.

### ***Teen Film and Teen Girl Film***

There are two commonly cited histories for teen film. Either teen film began in the 1950s with the emergence of the teenager as a social and cultural subject in their own right, or it began in the 1980s, when the consolidation of narrative and aesthetic elements produced a “tight, singular generic form” that continued to serve as a model for decades to come (Driscoll 2011, 9).<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, teenagers emerged as both viable consumers and subjects of film due to a combination of material factors, including ongoing suburbanization and the subsequent rise of television (Doherty 2002, 18-19; Spigel 1992, 2001), the rise of multi-screen movie theatres (Shary 2002), and the ever-shifting economic relations between studios and theatres during the latter half of the twentieth century (King 2017). Teens and younger audiences became a valuable demographic for the film studios to capture, as new media continued to proliferate and more traditional modes of distribution (such as the traditional theatre release) wavered in the midst of a rapidly shifting media landscape.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> As Driscoll (2011) argues, however, these two available histories are arbitrary and largely erase teen film history which took place prior to the 1950s, which contributed greatly to more popular post-war depictions of youth, romance, education, clashes between the generations, and many other narrative calling cards of teen film even today.

<sup>5</sup> There is certainly also something to be said about the ways in which, in an increasingly destabilized economy, the limits of adolescence and ‘teendom’ continue to stretch beyond the traditional bounds of young adulthood into one’s 20s and even 30s.

The existing literature has often fixated on teen films of the 1950s — the decade to establish emerging genre conventions; the 1980s — especially the John Hughes films of this decade, which represent a kind of golden age of teen cinema; and even the boom of teen films of the late 1990s that followed the unexpected financial success of *Clueless* (Heckerling 1995).<sup>6</sup> According to some scholars, this moment — and 1995’s *Clueless* in particular — also represented a seismic shift in the film industry’s primary demographic from young men to young women, which resulted in more girl protagonists and girl culture being represented in mainstream film than ever before (Gateward and Pomerance 2002, 15). Understanding these historical, material shifts is important in situating any discussion of 2000s era girl culture and teen girl film. And yet, as Colling (2014) points out, work on more recent eras of teen girl film also serves to legitimize the study of girl culture beyond its historical conditions. It is important, according to Colling, to maintain an emphasis on “what the films *do* [...] on how they are designed to make us feel, instead of how they represent a particular time” (2014, 10). If the development of teen film is not tied to a singular historical period, but rather a steadily growing awareness of adolescence as “a personal and social crisis” (Driscoll 2011, 12), the thematic and narrative elements of teen film are what bind the genre together across time and space.<sup>7</sup>

Teen films can be defined by their focus on coming-of-age narratives, nascent heterosexuality, and maturity as a narrative obstacle. Many scholars of teen film advocate for an approach that is more “discursive rather than aesthetic” (Driscoll 2011, 2) — in other words, the parameters of the genre are based upon the questions being asked of the films’ central characters and their environments as opposed to any kind of cohesive style, aesthetic, or subgenre. As film

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, Doherty 2002; Lee 2010; Lewis 1992; Kaveney 2006; Shary 2002, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Teen film, argued Considine as early as 1985, has a striking global appeal due to the fact that its motifs are rarely culturally specific or altogether unique.

scholars have pointed out, these common motifs and teen film tropes are also gendered. Catherine Driscoll, writing on popular film as girl culture, distinguishes between what she calls youth film, focused around rebellious subcultural themes, and teen film, which is centered on the institutional life of teens at home and school (2002, 203-204). The former are generally aligned with boys and the latter with girls, aligning with early subcultural studies critiques from the likes of Angela McRobbie and others that there was diminishing space for youth who were not cis, straight boys in the spaces and imaginations of subcultural formation (McRobbie and Garber 1976; see also Kearney 2006). In her work on teen girl film, Samantha Colling distinguishes between the comedic elements typically found in teen film, concluding that teen girl film is full of moments of “girl fun,” which typically center around visibility, while films like *Superbad* celebrate “boy fun” which hinges upon “rites of passage that are age restricted by law, explicitly aggressive, or fundamentally based around male bonding” (2014, 18).<sup>8</sup> No teen girl film equivalents to these films exist, concludes Colling, because what is imagined as appropriate “girl fun” is inherently restricted and subject to a particular cinematic gaze (2014, 19).<sup>9</sup>

Another defining structure of the teen film is the way in which the genre (and the subjects interpellated therein) is defined by its liminality. Driscoll (2011, 2) and Adrian Martin (1994, 66) have both suggested that the teen in teen film refers primarily to a mode of behaviour, characterized as a contradiction between maturity and immaturity. “The teen in teen movie,” writes Martin, “refers not to biological age, but a type, a mode of behaviour, a way of being [...] The teen in teen movies means something more like youth” (1994, 67). The semantics of age

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<sup>8</sup> Tania Modleski also notes that while abjection is typically leveraged for male bonding, turning “men’s bodies and bodily emissions [...] into the kind of comedy we have come to know as gross-out humor,” female bodies’ abjection is continually framed as disgusting and — more often than not — a contaminating threat to male characters’ masculinity (2014, 123-125).

<sup>9</sup> These restrictions are almost always reinforced by film categorizations and rating systems, with “boy fun” films regularly receiving higher ratings than “girl fun” films’ more PG trends (Colling 2014, 18).

alone are too restricting to define a genre preoccupied with liminality, a muddying of boundaries that maps neatly onto similarly elastic understandings of girlhood. Teen girl film is structured by notions of girlhood, but the ‘girl’ in this label is less a literal female teenager and rather an idea of female adolescence and its themes. The girl is a figure created by a set of discourses; as Catherine Grant and Lori Waxman note, “girlhood is not meant simply as an age but as an allegorical state” (2011, 2). This notion of girlhood as elastic is an idea that has been explored at length in girl studies literature, and within the burgeoning field of girls’ studies itself (Kearney 2009, Swindle 2011, Mitchell 2016). Despite these elastic temporalities, there persists an idea in film scholarship that teen film is made to be watched by the “ideal teenager” of a particular time and place (Driscoll 2011, 3), with little consideration given to the cultural imperialism endemic to teen film texts (Considine 1985; Driscoll 2011) but also the nostalgia that frequently leads to older audiences’ longstanding, intense attachments to the screen cultures of their youths. With these conventions in mind, I contend that any discussion of teen film’s discursive impacts needs to take into account the temporal ‘slip’ of not only generic convention and films’ on-screen subjects, but also the ages and subjecthoods of the audiences viewing and internalizing these narratives.

This dissertation shares many convictions around teen film and girl culture with Colling, who writes that she seeks to approach teen girl films “from a position that does not reinforce the kinds of aesthetic hierarchies that perpetuate the ‘silliness’ of girls and girl culture” (2014, 8). There is a tendency, writes Colling, to justify one’s focus in girls studies by “reclaiming specified pleasures as ideologically resistant, empowering, or conversely oppressive” (2014, 28). This often results in teen girl films being “guiltily reclaimed,” while what the films actually *do* is overlooked. As Colling (2014, 31-32) argues:

If a genre like girl teen film is only ever explored in respect of its relation to ‘reality’ [...] if it is constantly exposed as ideologically conservative or secretly subversive, it will only ever be understood as a form that either reflects girlhood accurately or inaccurately, perpetuating the idea that accurate representations of girlhood are worth more.

I share Colling’s belief that the pleasures of teen girl film can be uncomplicated; that we should not have to search the “cracks” of the texts to find non-conformist or recuperable moments (2014, 49). Teen girl films do not have to be subversive or even especially *good* (however one might measure such a thing) to have a meaningful impact. Because of the sheer volume of media teens consume, it is often the banal repetition of certain tropes that add up over time. In this sense, all teen film is ripe for intertextual references and humour, frequently relying on audiences already being aware of certain assumptions, tropes, and cultural structures to feel ‘in on the joke.’ The use of language and word play in teen girl film is a perfect example of this exchange; film that engages with — or creates — contemporary youthful vernacular is one of the genre’s most obvious potential pleasures (Colling 2014, 48). This also means that, as films such as *Jennifer’s Body* illustrate, the genre is ripe for camp-y depictions of taste cultures and gender. In teen girl films, “every surface communicates” (Thrift 2008, 13); I am particularly interested in how teen films count on girls’ knowledge of music cultures and the gendered dynamics therein to build tension, construct humour, and ultimately offer astute commentary on indie rock culture tropes.

There are three films I use as anchors for my discussion of indie rock in teen girl film, gendered aesthetics in 2000s teen film, gatekeeping practices, and what I term ‘indie camp.’ In keeping with Colling’s belief that the study of teen girl film shouldn’t be defended via their subversive potential or a degree of nuance that only exists in subtext (“the cracks”), all three films chosen for this analysis have been entangled in some degree of controversy or labelled ‘not

good’ (again, whatever that means) for some reason or another.<sup>10</sup> Thus, in addition to discussing each film in its own right, its paratexts, and reception at the time of its release, I am also interested in how or if the intervening decade and a half has shifted the way that we view these texts. Namely, I wonder if a certain amount of distance from the mid-2000s heyday of indie rock’s cultural mainstreaming changes the way it is possible to read these films.

### ***Garden State (2004) or, What Makes an Indie Crossover Hit?***

Indie music is not exclusive to indie film; however, the two designations overlap enough that it is worth exploring their similarities here. It is likely that indie film borrowed the term from indie music, since music was the first realm to shorten “independent” in this way, but the two areas continue to overlap and inform one another — ultimately facing many of the same problems (Sexton 2017). As with indie music, indie film refers not just to the texts themselves, but a wider cultural network that sustains them and — also similar to music — represents a nebulous and much-contested canon. I draw here from Geoff King’s (2017, 2) definition of indie film, which he establishes as:

[...] a particular range of non-Hollywood cinema that came to prominence, crystallized, and achieved a particular range of institutionalization in the period from approximately the mid- to late 1980s into the 1990s, when it grew significantly to the point [that] issues of [...] cooptation were raised.

In other words, much like indie music, the 2000s represented a time when the boundaries, authenticity, and porousness of indie film was being challenged as what Michael Newman (2011) refers to as the “Sundance-Miramax era,” stretching from the 1980s to the late aughts, drew to a close. As Newman observes, ‘indie’ anything is best understood as a spectrum whose

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<sup>10</sup> Since Jonathan Gray first published on anti-fandom and non-fandom in the early 2000s, there’s been a wider reconsideration in fan studies and related fields of those texts that are largely understood to be unpopular or ‘not good.’ I would argue that this is markedly different, however, from lending legitimacy to girl culture texts and audiences that will perhaps always be beyond recuperability.

determination requires paying attention to circulation alongside storytelling and economic success (2011, 10). “By focusing on texts alone,” he contends, “We miss much of what makes categories significant to our encounters with media” (2011, 11). The difference between indie and independent, then, is part of “a hierarchical process of discursive positioning” and, according to King, even suggests “a falling away from the higher standards and demands implied by independent” (2017, 1). Some film scholars and critics use the term ‘Indiewood’ to account for the rise in indie crossover films since the 1990s; because of the increasingly entangled studio system, indie crossovers were often able to leverage the cultural capital of indie film, its ideas around creative production, authenticity, and opposition while still receiving major studio backing (King 2017, 5; Newman 2017, 27). The increased prevalence of this type of film has led to a simultaneous condemnation of the so-called ‘mini-majors’ and specialty divisions of Hollywood studios that have exploited this indie sensibility, along with a cultural mainstreaming of this sensibility to the point that indie crossover hits were, for a time, ripe for immediate and harsh cultural backlash.

One of the first major indie crossover films to experience this trajectory (and set up parallel debates around the boundaries of indie music and film) was Zach Braff’s *Garden State* (2004). The film was written, directed by, and stars Braff, better known at the time for his role in NBC medical comedy-drama series *Scrubs* (2001-2010). The film was nominated for the Grand Jury prize at the 2004 Sundance Film Festival, where it was immediately purchased in a joint venture by Fox Searchlight Pictures and Miramax and went on to make \$35.8 million at the box office, despite being made for just \$2.5 million (Fox 2014). Braff has alluded to the fact that the screenplay draws on his own experiences. In the film, Andrew Largeman, an underachieving and depressed 20-something, returns to his small New Jersey hometown in the wake of his mother’s

death, ultimately decides to go off the antidepressant medication that has been keeping him “numb” for fifteen years, and unexpectedly falls for Sam (Natalie Portman). The plot of *Garden State* pales in importance for many, however, to its soundtrack — a key aspect of the film’s devolution into cliché in the years since its release.

The music in the film features predominantly indie rock artists, notably the Shins. In a scene early in the film, Sam passes Andrew an oversized set of headphones playing the song “New Slang” and quips, “You gotta hear this one song — it’ll change your life, I swear.” The soundtrack sold over 1.3 million copies and has been certified platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America; it was nominated by the Broadcast Film Critics Association for Best Soundtrack in 2005, the first year the awards introduced the category (Recording Academy; Paoletta 2007). The same year, Braff received a Grammy Award for Best Compilation Soundtrack Album for a Motion Picture, Television or Other Visual Media.<sup>11</sup> There has been more than one reference to “the Zach Braff effect,” or the success of the artists involved in the soundtrack following its success (Leopold 2008).<sup>12</sup> It didn’t take long, however, for audiences’ opinions of the authenticity and relatability of both film and soundtrack to sour. By the time Braff hosted Saturday Night Live in early 2007, the self-seriousness of the film alongside its indie rock soundtrack had already become somewhat of an easy mark. In a skit where Braff plays a high school student among a group of students attempting to select a theme for the upcoming senior prom (SNL), Braff’s character suggests a *Garden State* theme because the film’s soundtrack “changed [his] life.” The prom committee disparages it as a “*Pitchfork* mix CD” and

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<sup>11</sup> Braff’s nomination and subsequent win of this award follows a pattern identified in a previous chapter, wherein directors or showrunners receive accolades for soundtracks without acknowledging (and thus making culturally legible) the work of music supervisors. The supervisor for *Garden State* was Amanda Scheer-Demme, whose other supervision project to hit theatres in 2004 was none other than 2000s girl culture mainstay *Mean Girls* (Waters).

<sup>12</sup> A *Billboard* article that came out in 2007 even credits Braff with kicking off a trend of film directors tapping a single, personally selected artist to provide the majority of their soundtrack. According to one marketing executive quoted, “*Garden State* was almost like an hour-and-a-half long commercial for the soundtrack” (Paoletta 2007).



refuses.<sup>13</sup> Braff's character replies that he happens to know "those songs were very carefully chosen," but majority rules.<sup>14</sup> In a 2014 retrospective on *Garden State*, music writer Dan Ozzi wrote back-to-back essays highlighting the shift in audience attitudes as the film's accolades grew:

And then there's the soundtrack. What a collection of hits! It was like Braff clickwheeled through your third generation iPod and cherrypicked your favorite songs from your indie music playlists and wed them with some classics like Simon & Garfunkel. Imagine the thrill we, the CMJ-attending LiveJournalists, felt about the novelty of hearing an Iron & Wine song in a big theatrical release. And covering the Postal Service, no less!

[...]

And then there's the soundtrack. What a collection of shit! It was like Braff pulled a bunch of rejects from a Wes Anderson movie and mashed them together with the fitting room tunes of Urban Outfitters. Imagine the thrill we, the unfuckable indie rock nerds, felt about having our boring tastes pandered to in a big theatrical release. And getting away with it, no less!

The backlash against both the film and the soundtrack highlights the parallel issues facing indie music and film by the early 2000s; perceived authenticity was undermined by critical acclaim and mainstream success, leading to claims that *Garden State* was nothing more than "a hubristically deliberate bid to be *The Graduate* for the Exhausted Aughts" (Vulture 2011).<sup>15</sup>

*Garden State* also threw into sharp relief the direct line between "Pitchfork mix CD" music taste and the kind of garden variety, hipster misogyny reflected in both Braff's character and the film's writing itself. The primary point of connection between Sam (Portman) and Andrew (Braff) is via the Shins and, as the film goes on, the writing does little to advance her

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<sup>13</sup> For more on *Pitchfork*'s location at the nexus of indie rock tastemaking media, see Chapter 4.

<sup>14</sup> This highlights the affective investment of directors and showrunners who bring their own personal taste to bear on their projects' soundtracks, and only further serves to conflate music curation with the necessary and often much more urgent task of licensing particular tracks for sync (see Chapter 2).

<sup>15</sup> Beyond the fact that the Exhausted Aughts would make an excellent pop punk band name, it is also worth noting here that the success of Simon and Garfunkel's soundtrack for 1968's *The Graduate* was another key turning point for soundtracks as defining objects of youth taste cultures. By the end of the sixties, teen film soundtracks had become wildly popular due both to the juvenilization of film audiences and the rising popularity of the album format amongst youth (Thornton 1995, 65).

interiority or develop Sam as a character in her own right. *Garden State* was one of the first indie crossover films to use music as a convenient shorthand for a female love interest's 'taste' and as a measure of relationships, but it was hardly the last. The film *Elizabethtown*, released the following year, features a female character so one-dimensional that her only defining traits seem to be making indie-heavy mixtapes.<sup>16</sup> *Elizabethtown* inspired Nathan Rabin of *The A.V. Club* to write a review of the film in which he coined the term "Manic Pixie Dream Girl" to describe Kirsten Dunst's character; the term has since been taken up as shorthand for underdeveloped female characters who "exist solely in the fevered imaginations of sensitive writer-directors to teach broodingly soulful young men to embrace life and its infinite mysteries and adventures" (Rabin 2007).<sup>17</sup> In 2009's *(500) Days of Summer*, the character of Summer (Zoey Deschanel) impresses Tom (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) by recognizing The Smiths' "There is a Light that Never Goes Out" playing through his headphones. This sequence, which features prominently in the film's trailer, works narratively to symbolize connections between the two characters but also, as Newman suggests, to appeal to a specific target audience: "This sense of individuality of taste flatters the audience for having its own tastes, which might include a taste for the film as a representation of cute and hip characters who they might see as similar to themselves" (2013, 77-78). In this way, one's knowledge of indie rock is used as a shorthand for taste and a stand-in for additional character development; the fact that girls possess knowledge that matches or exceeds that of the male lead is always met with awe — Tom is left gaping and nearly speechless after Summer exits the elevator after their meet cute, managing only a mumbled, "Holy shit." This

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<sup>16</sup> This aligns with the strong preference for analog media in indie music cultures that often infiltrates film depictions of an indie sensibility (see Sexton 2017, 121-122). Indie crossovers' characters preference for oversized, over-ear headphones fit into this lineage, as does Sam's extensive vinyl collection in *Garden State* and Nick's painstakingly crafted mixtapes in *Nick & Norah's Infinite Playlist*.

<sup>17</sup> The term has since been retroactively applied to Sam in *Garden State*, as well.

trope, which infiltrates so many indie crossovers of the early 2000s,<sup>18</sup> is frequently presented without a hint of irony, and therefore heartbreakingly straightforward in its messaging — to win over the floppy-haired indie boy protagonist of the week, a girl needs to cultivate an exhaustive appreciation for indie music past and present... and not much else.

### *Juno (2007) or, The Rise of Twee*

The gendered aspects of indie rock subculture show up in a wholly other form in *Juno* (Reitman 2007). The 2007 film was writer Diablo Cody's first screenplay and follows the character of Juno MacGuff (Elliot Page), a Minnesotan teenager confronted with an unplanned pregnancy. Shortly after premiering at the Toronto International Film Festival, *Juno* received Oscar nominations for Best Picture, Best Director, Elliot Page's performance as the title character, and Cody's original screenplay; it also became the first Fox Searchlight film to gross more than \$100 million (Lyons 2017). In addition to the success of the film, the soundtrack reached #1 on Billboard's 200 chart — the first Oscar nominated film to occupy such a spot since *Titanic* (1997) — and was also a hit download, the #1 seller on the iTunes music store (Newton 2011, 243). Jason Reitman had initially planned for a glam rock soundtrack, but when Reitman asked Page what bands the scripted characters would listen to, the actor suggested something more stripped back.<sup>19</sup> Page recommended the Moldy Peaches, a New York based indie-folk duo featuring Adam Green and Kimya Dawson, who went on to shape what would become *Juno*'s distinctive sound. Dawson ended up contributing five original songs to the soundtrack, along with a number of existing Moldy Peaches tracks; the result is what one reviewer calls “a back-and-forth between first-rate indie rock and Kimya Dawson's lullaby-like

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<sup>18</sup> It is worth noting, however, that those films that invoke this trope are nearly exclusively written by men, and often men who have admitted to identifying with the plight of the male lead — which only makes it all the more troubling.

<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, multiple accounts of the soundtrack's origin story seem to suggest that glam rock was, among other things, ultimately deemed too inauthentic.

gems” (Coney 2018).<sup>20</sup> The resulting soundtrack was “defiantly indie-sounding” (Myers 2008), propelling a style of indie music that had never seen mainstream popularity to the top of the charts and ultimately bolstering the backlash that rose up to meet *Juno* almost as soon as the film made it beyond the festival circuit.

Backlash to *Juno* was largely founded on the widespread disavowal of the film’s aesthetic integrity, its claims to ‘indieness,’ and its status (or projected status) as an independent cultural artifact. While early critics shored up the film’s indie cred by drawing connections to other films, actors’ previous work, and novice screenwriter Diablo Cody’s “tantalizing” bio,<sup>21</sup> by the time *Juno* made it to theatres, a significant portion of audiences were critical of the film’s quirky sensibility. The various elements of *Juno* — characters, dialogue, situations, and soundtrack — combined in what Newman identifies as “a clear instance of a film performing its own indieness, its own alternative sensibility” (2011, 235). Two primary targets were the film’s dialogue, which one writer for *Vice* called “the most irritating linguistic gumbo imaginable,” and the “horribly precious” soundtrack — both combined to produce “quirk after quirk for quirk’s sake” (Lyons 2017; BuzzFeed 2008). The calculated quirkiness was often interpreted as disingenuous; an attempt to “work both ends” of the Hollywood-indie spectrum and capture audiences who positioned themselves as “belonging to a wished for interpretive community — one that is ‘off beat’ and ‘non-mainstream’” (Barker 2008, 1; MacDowell 2017, 85). A reporter for *Slate* magazine writes of the “faux-humble Oscar push” attempting to position the film as “‘the little movie that could,’ even as Fox throws the full weight of its marketing dollars behind

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<sup>20</sup> Somewhat of a false binary, given that Dawson was embedded in one of the most vibrant indie rock scenes of the 2000s (New York City) and therefore hardly lacking in legitimacy or “first-rate-ness” (see Lizzy Goodman’s *Meet Me in the Bathroom*).

<sup>21</sup> Cody’s experience as a sex worker and stripper were frequently invoked in headlines around *Juno* to spike interest; a fictionalized interview in *Esquire* imagines Cody in “Lucite heels” cracking jokes about pasties and hand jobs (Belloni 2008).

it” (Stevens 2008). In other words, it was less its success than the *discourse* around its success that undermined *Juno*’s perceived authenticity; that this distrust extended to its bestselling soundtrack positioned *Juno* at the heart of 2000s debates around quirkiness in indie cultures.

While the exact parameters of ‘quirk’ as a sensibility are vague, a number of film scholars have written about the ‘quirky’ logics and aesthetics frequently invoked in indie crossovers. Quirk is a “natural tone” for indie cinema because it is by definition unconventional; according to James MacDowell, it makes sense to imagine indie as made up of many different sensibilities, and to treat quirky as one of these facets (Newton 2011, 235; MacDowell 2017, 86). Aspects of quirky include, among other things, “a shared ironic-yet-sincere tone,” and quirky films relying on a tonal tension between ironic detachment and sincere engagement with their diegetic worlds and central characters (MacDowell 2017, 86-91).<sup>22</sup> The deliberate curation of *Juno* included a deliberate curation of such quirkiness, mainly evident via the irony laden dialogue of the film’s main characters that came up against so much critique in its reviews (Sexton 2017, 118) and led to accusations of being “twee” (Lorentzen 2004) and “regressive” (Editors 2004). “Twee” is another term that is popular in descriptions of both the film and soundtrack; one film music scholar describes Dawson’s songs as “twee, gentle, and winsome” (Sexton 2017, 118) while another writer notes that the twee music featured in the film is the primary factor in the text’s “perceived quirk” (Newton 2011, 240). In his book *Twee: The Gentle Revolution in Music, Books, Television, Fashion, and Film*, writer Marc Spitz (2014, 12-13) describes twee as possessing a number of traits, including:

[...] the suspicion of adulthood and celebration of childhood; a prizing of beauty over ugliness; an interest in sex but a wariness and shyness about it; a dispensing of ‘cool’ as it is conventionally known and a fetishization of the ‘nerd’; a keen awareness of darkness

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<sup>22</sup> This is framed in contrast to earlier, indie “smart films,” such as those described by Sconce (2002).

clashing with a steadfast focus on our essential goodness; a lust for knowledge; and the cultivation of a passion project.

Like quirk, twee is a vague, ‘know it when you see it’ type category connoting cuteness or a lighter indie aesthetic invested in play and a kind of “calculated precocity” (MacDowell 2011; Spitz 2014). In music, it often refers to the lo-fi, folky indie pop similar to that contributed by Dawson to the *Juno* soundtrack; as Newton observes, this kind of indie pop often opposes ‘heavier’ modes that draw on the masculinized aggression of rock and punk styles (2011, 240). The backlash against twee indie music was nothing new — as described by Ben Myers (2008), tweeness has long roots in 1980s British indie scenes and beyond. While Myers writes of twee indie pop ‘making it’ in an American mainstream film like *Juno* as an overdue success for the subgenre, I also contend that the gendered dimensions of twee played no small part in the backlash against *Juno* as both a piece of quirky indie crossover cinema and teen girl film.<sup>23</sup>

The tension between ironic and sincere musical engagement is further codified in the diegesis of the film via the character of Mark Loring (Jason Bateman), one half of the adoptive couple Juno chooses for her baby. While she is initially skeptical of Mark and Vanessa (Jennifer Garner) because of their suburban, WASP-y exteriors, over the course of the film Juno grows close with Mark on the basis of a shared love of music and 1980s slasher films, although the two disagree on the best era for punk:

MARK: ‘93. I’m telling you that was the best time for rock and roll.

JUNO: Nuh uh. 1977. Punk Volume 1. You weren’t there, so you can’t understand the magic.

MARK: Th—you weren’t even alive!

Mark is insistent on making Juno a mix CD of his favourite music, which she disparages as “cute” and counters with her own mix. Mark balks at this, remarking, “I can’t wait to see what

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<sup>23</sup> There is also a distinct queerness to *Juno*’s sound. Dawson came out as nonbinary in 2019, and Page has been outspoken about his pre-transition gender dysphoria playing a pregnant teen — *Juno*’s tweeness is also queer.

*you have to teach me.*” While Mark is initially introduced as a sympathetic character, by the end of the film he has left Vanessa to pursue his “cool guy” dreams, disappointing both her and Juno on a spectacular scale. “One might expect an indie film that is so effectively performing its own alternative-ness to celebrate this character,” writes Newman. “But actually we are more likely to think he is pathetic for not growing up and accepting adult responsibility” (2011, 239). I would go further to argue that not only does *Juno* subvert the audience’s expectations, it actively identifies and subverts a dynamic that appears in both film and real life music cultures wherein older, musically inclined men take it upon themselves to bestow taste on younger girls and women. In *High Fidelity* (Frears 2000), Rob (John Cusack) is constantly trying to influence the taste of his girlfriends by making them mixes of what he deems good music. In *Juliet, Naked* (Peretz 2018) — another Nick Hornby adaptation — Duncan (Chris O’Dowd) is an obsessive indie fan prone to cajoling unsuspecting house guests into his office slash shrine to show them unreleased B-sides of fictional indie singer-songwriter Tucker Crow.<sup>24</sup> Amidst all of its self-conscious quirk, a good portion of the ‘sincere’ in *Juno* comes from the titular character’s unwillingness to compromise her taste to Mark’s dad-splaining, Sonic Youth loving ways. By the end of *Juno*’s runtime, the character that could be a caricature of a Nick Hornby lead is handily and unapologetically sidelined, while the fast-talking, twee girl nerd comes out on top.

### ***Jennifer’s Body (2009) or, A Feminist Camp Imagining of Indie***

The third and final case study is *Jennifer’s Body* (Kusama 2009), which is also the only film discussed to feature a full-fledged indie rock band in its narrative. Mirroring the 1994 Hole

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<sup>24</sup> This trope also manifests in real world music cultures. Phoebe Bridgers, speaking of her alleged abuse at the hands of ‘90s indie darling Ryan Adams, notes that she still toured with Adams because of name recognition and his influence in the industry (Coscarelli and Ryzik 2019). Adams, who has since been the subject of sexual assault allegations from multiple female musicians, continues to write and release new music; he contributed a number of songs featured on the *Juliet, Naked* soundtrack.

song about a kidnapping from which it takes its name,<sup>25</sup> *Jennifer's Body* is about what happens when high schooler Jennifer Check (Megan Fox) is abducted after a show by an indie rock frontman (Adam Brody), who plans to offer her to the devil as a virgin sacrifice in return for a lucrative record deal. The plan backfires spectacularly, however, as it turns out that Jennifer is in fact far from virginal and, rather than simply die, the ritual ends up turning Jennifer into a bloodthirsty succubus and leaves her childhood best friend Needy (Amanda Seyfried) to piece together what has happened and attempt to curb the ensuing bloodbath. The film has grown into a veritable cult classic over the intervening years, but its initial release grossed just \$16 million domestically on a \$16 million budget (Peitzman 2018). And while the backlash to *Garden State* and *Juno* is wrapped up in questions of authenticity, subcultural capital, and taste, *Jennifer's Body* failed for one very simple reason: while the film itself offers a “heady exploration of toxic female friendship and imbalanced power structures” (Nilles 2019), it’s all but impossible to discern such themes from its marketing and early reviews.

*Jennifer's Body* had the misfortune of premiering at the height of simultaneous cultural backlashes against both its screenwriter and its lead actor. Diablo Cody was still reeling from *Juno* backlash but, thanks to its unprecedented financial success, was still given free reign by a major studio to make whatever she wanted. She wrote the part of Jennifer for Megan Fox, who had already been typecast after her performance in *Transformers* (Bay 2007); as one writer describes it, “Cody was considered a gimmicky one-hit wonder who was way too precious with her made-up slang, and Fox was considered a vapid Maxim cover girl best qualified to wash a car in a bikini” (Grady 2018). The knee jerk reaction of the studio was to market *Jennifer's Body* as a sex comedy, which resulted in young female audiences (Cody and director Karyn Kusama’s

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<sup>25</sup> A naming convention that echoes, in many ways, the intergenerational influence of prolific music supervisors in Chapter 2 and different ‘waves’ of indie rock influences discussed in the Outro.



intended audience) intuiting that the film was not for them, while male audiences were vocally appalled by a film that had very little to do with its marketing and — rather than sex — featured more than one scene in which Megan Fox disembowels a hapless male classmate. As Kusama put it in a recent interview, the marketing for the film was “an epic misstep; they sold it to boys instead of the girls who it was written for, and by, and about” (Blichert 2021, 32).<sup>26</sup>

The reviews were also scathing, similarly stuck on the expectation that this was a different movie altogether. *The Washington Post* (Hornaday 2009) called the movie “a lurid adolescent distraction,” while the *Baltimore Sun*’s Michael Sragow (2009) noted that “the one perfect aspect of *Jennifer’s Body* is its title: no one is going to like this movie for its brain.” Critic Robert Ebert (2009) was not entirely unkind, noting that, “for a movie about a flesh-eating cheerleader, it’s better than it had to be,” before finally landing on “*Twilight* for boys.” The reclamation of *Jennifer’s Body* would take almost ten years to arrive, by which point the girl audiences alienated by the film’s initial marketing campaign had found it, devoured it, and were ready to give it the overdue accolades it deserved. *Refinery29* declared the titular Jennifer a “feminist revenge hero who came too early,” and one *Vice* headline in October 2018 noted that “*Jennifer’s Body* Would Kill If It Came Out Today” (Cohen 2018; Blichert 2018). Other headlines were indignant. According to *Buzzfeed*, “You Probably Owe *Jennifer’s Body* An Apology” (Peitzman 2018), as *Vox*’s Constance Grady (2018) noted that: “*Jennifer’s Body* is good now. More precisely, *Jennifer’s Body* was always good, and everyone is just now starting to get on its level.” Most culture critics writing through the film’s revival drew a direct line between the film’s status as an emergent classic of the feminist horror genre and the #MeToo movement, the wave of activism speaking out about sexual assault in the entertainment industry

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<sup>26</sup> Cody was 31 and Kusama was 41 when *Jennifer’s Body* hit theatres; that the creators self-identify here as ‘girls’ speaks to the term’s capaciousness.

and other highly visible fields that reached its zenith in late 2017.<sup>27</sup> And while this certainly explains the timing of the film's new relevance, I argue that dismissing *Jennifer's Body* as simply 'ahead of its time' strips all of the nuance out of the narrative that unfolded around its reception — and the gendered backlash that it faced — in 2009.

Horror as a genre is rooted in the social history of monsters, and one that has been largely defined by the relationship between monstrosity and women. *Jennifer's Body* draws on this long relationship between girls and horror (see Shary 2003, 14), grounding Jennifer and Needy's story in established genre conventions of the feminized abject, certainly, but also in the context of an indie music culture familiar to anyone who lived through the 2000s. The film's soundtrack is full of male-fronted indie and emo bands, "a buffet of sensitive boy bands that shaped the [2000s]" including Dashboard Confessional, Cute Is What We Aim For, and Panic! At the Disco (Fonseca 2018). Imaginary band Low Shoulder, the ones who attempt to barter Jennifer's life for an album deal, are positioned "somewhere between mall emo and The Killers" (Ewens 2018). Adam Brody was arguably perfectly cast as lead singer Nikolai; in 2009, Brody was already known for his role as the indie-loving nerd Seth Cohen on *The O.C.* (2003-2007) and guitar-schlepping Dave Rygalski on *Gilmore Girls* (2002-2003). According to writer Lena Wilson, "Anybody who thinks Diablo Cody and Karyn Kusama didn't know exactly what they were doing might want to consider their cultural blind spots" (in Fonseca 2018). The much-coveted members of Low Shoulder are described by at various points in the film as "agents of Satan with really awesome haircuts," "douche-bags with [...] man-scara," and "skinny, and twisted, and evil;" much of the horror of the film lies in slowly realizing the extent of just how far the band is willing to go to make it. In a scene that Kusama has described as the "mission statement" for the rest of the film,

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<sup>27</sup> See Carvello 2018; Coscarelli and Ryzik 2019; Curto 2020.

Nikolai and his bandmates have taken Jennifer to the middle of the woods and calmly explained that she is their ticket to indie rock stardom — which, as Frederick Blichert (2021) points out, is already poking fun at the oversaturation of indie rockers by the late 2000s. As Jennifer tearfully begs for her life, Nikolai crouches down next to where she is bound and gagged:

NIKOLAI: Do you know how hard it is to make it as an indie band these days?<sup>28</sup> There's so many of us. And we're all so *cute* and it's like, if you don't get on Letterman or some retarded soundtrack, you're screwed, okay? Satan is our only hope. We're in league with the beast now, and we have to make a really big impression on him. And to do that, we're going to have to butcher you.

By connecting the (at this point, still presumed) virginal sacrifice to music industry success, this scene effectively parodies some of the more toxic gender dynamics of emo and indie subcultures — as one commentator notes, there are uncanny parallels here with “bands [who] would use women as inspiration but also silence them simultaneously” (Pop This 2020).<sup>29</sup> This scene also represents a subtle shift in the direction of the film. Film scholars Deborah Wills and Toni Roberts (2019) have written that *Jennifer's Body* suffers from an evasiveness about naming its monster; I contend that the monstrousness is actually just misplaced and is located, not in Jennifer at all, but rather in the “monstrous masculine” (see Jones 2013) and indie rock masculinities in particular. *Jennifer's Body* may have predated the #MeToo movement by the better part of a decade, but the way that the film deploys the intertextuality of Adam Brody's casting as Nikolai and depicts the band's leveraging of young women's fandom and bodies hits the mark in a way few other fictitious depictions of indie rock subcultures have before or since.

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<sup>28</sup> Low Shoulder's framing of indie success is also camped, however, when Nikolai calms a bandmate having second thoughts by admonishing, “Do you wanna be a loser, or do you want to be rich and awesome like that guy from Maroon 5?”

<sup>29</sup> For further discussion of these dynamics, see Jessica Hopper's “Emo: Where the Girls Aren't” (2003) and Hanif Abdurraqib's excellent chapters on Afropunk and Fall Out Boy in *They Can't Kill Us Until They Kill Us* (2017).

The ironic and even camp sensibility through which these themes are explored in *Jennifer's Body* might seem incongruous at first, not least of which due to girl culture's ties to realness (Colling 2014). The earliest writing on camp, including Susan Sontag's essay "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964), established camp as a sensibility founded in exaggeration, playfulness, artifice, and stylization. Since that time, the 'ironic turn' in culture is something that has been explored at length by music and film scholars alike, but women and women's cultural productions are rarely included among the cultural texts cited in these discussions. Steve Bailey, in an academic article on the impact of ironic cover albums, names dozens of examples of culture, from the Talking Heads to *Twin Peaks* to the Coen brothers and Devo — women are noticeably absent from his examples (2003, 141-155; see also Newman 2011). Similarly, in Pamela Robertson's discussions of feminist camp, she notes that women have historically not been associated with possessing a camp sensibility or producing camp texts, even as we take for granted that women are the *subjects* of camp (1996, 5). According to Robertson, women can and should reclaim camp as a political tool and rearticulate it to suit their own needs. "For feminists," she writes, "Camp's appeal resides in its potential to function as a form of gender parody" (1996, 10). Scores of people in the years since *Jennifer's Body* was first released have commented on how the film is only legible via the female gaze; it doesn't seem farfetched to extend this critique to the way the film leverages its humour. One *A.V. Club* review noted that Cody's script was little more than "a showy piece of writing that doesn't have that all-important ballast of sincerity" (Tobias 2009), but what if sincerity was never the point? What if we stopped expecting girl culture to be 'sincere' and focus on the work the film *is* doing? And how does our understanding of that work change when we reframe its impact (including those parts of the film that have *not* aged well, like the ableist slur in the above quote) via a lens of a feminist, indie camp?

If we forget what we know about irony and camp being exclusive properties of the male gaze, it becomes possible to read *Jennifer's Body* as a feminist camp critique of indie masculinities. The film's release date in 2009 may have been 'ahead of the curve' for some, but it was perfectly timed on the tails of indie's cultural mainstreaming following the scenes and soundtracks of the mid-2000s; as Andrew Ross has noted, "the camp effect" most often occurs at the moment when cultural products of an earlier moment have lost their power to dominate cultural meanings and become available, "in the present, for redefinition according to contemporary codes of taste" (Ross 1989, 5). This question of timing goes all the way back to Sontag's original essay; the process of "aging or deterioration" provides "the necessary detachment," she tells us, to consume with delight that which may have once made us indignant (1964, 523). If camp hinges on a "failed seriousness" (Sontag 1964), the failure audiences are meant to revel in is that of self-serious rock musicianship.<sup>30</sup> Accustomed to generic conventions, the abjectness we are initially encouraged to see in the film is Jennifer's monstrous femininity. By the film's end, however, the abject that contemporary audiences intuit is that of indie rock masculinities. Not only that, but this 'indie camp' mode also effectively subverts tropes about the corrupting power of popular music. As Blichert (2021) notes, the fictitious Low Shoulder literalizes outdated, reactionary attitudes towards pop culture, as Low Shoulder's horrific actions and subsequent success illuminate the ever-present threat of unchecked misogynistic violence. "We never needed to fear that kids were being brainwashed and recruited into devil-worshipping cults through music," writes Blichert (2021), "What we needed to fear is the much scarier, run-of-the-mill evil that lurks everywhere" (58-59). In depicting this banal — but no less terrifying — monstrosity, *Jennifer's Body* flips the script.

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<sup>30</sup> As Bailey (2003) notes, irony is frequently framed as antithetical to rock and roll.

## *Conclusions*

With the growing incorporation of indie music into its soundtracks, the screen cultures of the 2000s represented fertile ground for the exploration of authenticity, cultural value, and teen taste cultures. While this canon was not the first to do so — who can forget, for instance, Cher Horowitz’s jibes at the “maudlin music of the university [radio] station” and Josh’s preference for “cry baby music” in 1995’s *Clueless* — I have argued here that by the close of the 2000s there was a growing taste for ‘indie camp’ that pushed back against the self-seriousness of indie rock masculinities. The shifting contours of irony, quirk, twee, and camp over this period are demonstrated in the growing backlash against films such as *Garden State*, which invoke the manic pixie dream girl trope; the mixed reception of films like *Juno*, which are self-conscious and deliberate in their quirkiness; and the persistent reclamation of films such as *Jennifer’s Body*, which exposes the violence of the music industry for women and girls via its dark and campy depictions of indie masculinity. By exploring the varied ways these films experienced cultural backlash and the way in which that backlash has alternatively aged or abated over time, I hope to demonstrate the ways that, along with some much-needed distance from the intensity of mid-2000s discourses around indie authenticity, comes the opportunity to trouble these old narratives via feminist camp. Not only are teen and girl audiences capable of this level of nuanced reading, but — as demonstrated by myriad real-world examples of gatekeeping, outright exploitation, and violence — they are also the population that serves to benefit most from this subversion.

## Chapter Four

### PLAYLIST

This playlist focuses on indie rock artists that came up within and largely defined the New York City indie rock scene of the early 2000s, and the ways that music venues and the physical spaces of the city supported this scene.

#### 1. Someday — The Strokes (2001)

In the fall of 2000, The Strokes caught the attention of Mercury Lounge booker Ryan Gentles, who booked the fledgling band for a four-show run that December and would eventually quit his job to manage the band full time as they signed to RCA and went on to release the critically acclaimed *Is This It* (2001). Critics would write that the album and the band constituted a “world-changing moment” (Mulholland 2009) and provided “the template for rock ‘n’ roll in the modern day” (Lowe 2001). This musical moment — and this, the third of the album’s three wildly successful singles — is largely hailed as the turning point that saw garage rock resuscitated and the start of the single most prolific indie rock scene of the era, all concentrated in a few blocks of lower Manhattan. When I finally made it to the Mercury Lounge in 2021, it felt oddly anticlimactic — more or less like all the other dark, dive-y venues I loved back home in Toronto, newly endearing for being the first live gig I’d seen in almost twenty months of COVID lockdown measures. It was two days to Halloween, though, and in the bathroom — in between revelling in my time-honoured pastime of taking dive bar mirror selfies — I spotted a poster for a show the following night featuring a lineup of bands ‘doing’ famous New York bands in honour of the holiday. I burst out laughing when I saw who was headlining: a Strokes cover band, of course, testament to all of the ways in which five private school music nerds in skinny jeans became emblems of an era.

## **2. Stella Was a Diver and She Was Always Down — Interpol (2002)**

When I interviewed former music bloggers, one of my favourite questions I asked was: “What made a great show?” This was almost always met with giant smiles and specific memories of a handful of shows that stand out for some particular reason; one of the most memorable answers came from Sarah Lewitinn, who spent the early 2000s working at *SPIN Magazine* and also maintaining her own blog chronicling the nascent NYC indie rock scene. “I remember seeing Interpol at Mercury Lounge once, [and] it was the first time they ever played the song ‘Stella Was a Diver,’” recalled Lewitinn, noting that the song appeared on set lists from that night as “Punk Song” because the band hadn’t come up with a sticking title yet. “I remember hearing it and knowing at that moment that [it] was going to be the change. Like they finally made a song that was upbeat and successful and immediately interesting.” Less immediately listenable than their contemporaries The Strokes, Interpol’s debut album is similarly hailed as a defining album of the 2000s that found mainstream success after — as Lewitinn notes — finally finding a sound that resonated with long-time, local fans and new listeners alike.

## **3. Our Time — Yeah Yeah Yeahs (2003)**

The first brush I had with the livestream phenomenon that would take over COVID-era music was one of my Instagram friends sharing a video of Karen O performing “Our Time” from her Los Angeles home. In the four minute video, her six-year-old son yanks open a nondescript closet door of the house to reveal an under-the-stairs space lit by multi-coloured fairy lights and strung with colourful pennant banners. Inside, Karen O is perched with a red acoustic guitar, ready to launch into the most devastatingly lovely acoustic version of the infamous Yeah Yeah Yeahs deep cut. “It’s the year to be hated,”



she sings softly as she strums. “So glad that we made it!” This song has been a constant in the band’s setlists from the very start — there’s a fuzzy video on YouTube of the group playing it at what is allegedly their very first Mercury Lounge show, a doubly impressive artifact when you consider that cellphones at the time only had memory space for a few blurry photos, so it was likely shot on an actual, literal camera. The ways in which fans document shows may have changed drastically, but the enduring relevance of Karen O telling us that it’s *our time, sweet babe, to break on though* endures.

#### **4. NYC’s Like a Graveyard — Moldy Peaches (2001)**

The Moldy Peaches have a notably different sound than a lot of the other indie rock bands coming up in the New York City scene — quirky instead of cool, folk influences mixed in with the punk. This song, full of snarky lyrics about the ongoing gentrification of beloved New York neighbourhoods, had the distinct misfortune of dropping on the Peaches’ debut album on September 11, 2001. Much like the Strokes song “New York City Cops,” which was pulled from *This Is It* before its American release that same year, “NYC’s Like a Graveyard” now exists as a relic of a time when the political climate in the United States was particularly hostile to lyrics like “all the tombstones sky scraping” and “all the yuppies getting buried.” This song never got much airtime as a result, but other tracks from the Peaches album would go on to find great success on the *Juno* (2007) film soundtrack, including the notably more saccharine “Anyone Else But You.”

#### **5. New York, I Love You But You’re Bringing Me Down — LCD Soundsystem (2007)**

Another entry in the gentrification lament catalogue, NYILYBYBMD also goes on record for having one of the era’s most unwieldy titles. Played to close out LCD Soundsystem sets since its 2007 release, NYILYBYBMD follows in the tradition of Le

Tigre’s “My My Metrocard” and bemoans the changing conditions of New York City and its boroughs, the overly-policed streets and new bylaws that saw cultural industries and spaces struggling to stay afloat in a rapidly gentrifying city. To quote former music blogger Giulia Pines, who returned to live in New York after some years abroad: “Nowadays, I walk down city streets and I have this double vision. I see what’s actually there and then I see the New York of 2003 superimposed on top of it. I can see it so clearly [...] and I’m kind of sad about it. But you also feel really lucky that you know what it was like before.” Walking around the Lower East Side the last few sunny days of October 2021, I found myself wishing for this double vision — wishing I could have stood shoulder to shoulder with Giulia and Sarah and the rest of the bloggers at some of those early shows. But then there’s a moment where a girl crouches in front of me at the Mercury Lounge to take a video of the band with a practiced, steady hand and it occurs to me that — thank god — some things are never going to change.

## **6. Someday — Julia Jacklin (2017)**

The cover songs for these playlists came from a lot of different places and, as noted above, a band like the Strokes is common fodder for 2000s nostalgia and tribute. This particular cover gets at all the heartbreak of the original lyrics about growing up and apart from well-loved friends and places, slowed down enough for the words to land in your stomach like the kick to the gut they were maybe originally intended to be. One review calls it “heartbreaking and hypnotic” before going on to note that “Jacklin’s rendition strips back [the original instrumentation] for slow, lingering strumming and [a] languid, melodic bass” (Sicurella 2019). The cover — originally performed on triple j’s *Like a Version* program — has since garnered over three million views on YouTube,

underscoring the song's enduring resonance but also perhaps a unique openness to having this song remixed and repurposed in new ways.

## Front Row Girls: Deconstructing the Rock Critic Industrial Complex

### CHAPTER FOUR

Q: What's your recipe for breaking bands?

A: It's super easy. You get a few catchy songs, get the blogs, get their friends, get a few gigs... it's like a love story.

— Hianta Cassam Chenaï in “Making the Bands,” *NYLON* (July 2009)

Interviewing somebody over Zoom feels oddly fitting when you're in the midst of researching the impact of the early internet on musical tastemaking practices. Less than five minutes into our call, Giulia Pines has already launched into the story of how she found her way into the early blogging scene — by tracking down Laura Young, who had already made a name for herself shooting digital photos at shows and writing about her favourite local bands online. “The story of how I met Laura is hilarious,” confesses Pines. “It involved a lot of internet stalking.” Our Zoom bubbles blip and lag as we both laugh, and before long it feels like slipping into conversation with an old friend. Which, I remind myself, is fitting too.

Born and raised in Manhattan, Pines found herself — like many young people — swept up in the vibrant indie music scene of a post-9/11 New York City.<sup>1</sup> She was also part of a tight knit group of friends and aspiring writers who used the early internet to write about that scene, participating in a feedback loop that saw bloggers' favourite bands get more attention and recognition from the mainstream music press. “There was something about it that reminded me a little bit of the riot grrrl [sic] era,” reflects journalist Sia Michel. “These bloggers were an interesting mix of fan, reporter, cool hunter, and authority” (Goodman 2017, 341). The online chatter fuelling the scene that saw bands like the Strokes and Interpol go from local favourites to internationally acclaimed indie artists, however, was founded first and foremost on connection.

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<sup>1</sup> While there is not sufficient space to expand on the cultural and musical effects of 9/11 in full here, other writers have covered the impact of the terrorist attacks on the music industry more broadly (The Hollywood Reporter 2011) and New York City music scenes in particular (Goodman 2017).

Pines was still just thinking about starting her blog, *New York Doll*, when she finally met and befriended Laura Young, the quasi-anonymous blogger behind the popular *Modern Age* (named after a Strokes song, of course).<sup>2</sup> Pines, who was still an underage high school senior at the time, continues:

I'd been reading her blog for a while and seeing her pictures. And I was just like, "Who is this girl? I want to be this girl." And I guess I was at some — I don't even remember what show this was or who was playing. But at this point, it had been several months of my dragging one or two friends out to various shows with me. And I had gotten to this point where I was scrutinizing angles in photos to be like, where does this girl usually stand? How tall is she? If I'm in the front row and I see someone with a camera, I was to be able to be like, "That's her!" And that's exactly what happened. I saw this like tiny little Asian girl with glasses who looked to be like maybe the same age I was, and I was like, *that's her!* I was just like, "Is there any chance you're Laura from *The Modern Age*? I love your blog." And she was like, "Yes, I am! Email me. Let's meet up at another show." And I did email her and, you know, basically the first show [I went to] with the intention of meeting up with her, she introduced me to several other people. And they were all the bloggers who I'd been reading and I was like starstruck and sort of couldn't believe this [was happening]. And it was very, very welcoming.

Not long after, Pines stopped asking her friends to accompany her to shows. Audrey Neustadter, who was also friends with Young and ran her own blog called *Melody Nelson*, recalls that the sense of community was all-consuming:

I knew I was going to show up and see the same ten people, [and] we could chat an hour prior to anything happening on stage. Eventually, you'd probably meet before the show and go eat together. We all became friends, you know? Laura and I would end up making plans to do things together. And Giulia, she was a lot younger, but we would all meet up. And then one person would meet somebody. So like Laura had met Sarah Lewitinn, and then she introduced me to her. She also introduced me to Rob Sheffield, who writes for *Rolling Stone*. And he was a huge supporter of us. He really sort of valued the fact that there were these girls and boys — but mostly girls, you know — so interested in music. And so that's how it happened. It became a thing where you know you're going to show up and see everybody.

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<sup>2</sup> According to Larissa Wodtke (2008), the common practice of using specific musical references as the title of one's blog works to establish reader expectations and earns the blogger a certain degree of "subcultural capital" (after Thornton) based on a shared understanding of lyrics and/or obscure musical trivia.

Performances were endlessly rehashed on blogs in the days following shows, and as people began to catch on and follow the young bloggers for their musical discoveries and opinions on up-and-coming bands, their reach and influence as tastemakers grew. Before long, as the *NYLON* magazine quote that opens this chapter puts so deftly, blogs were the newest — and shiniest — link in the chain when it came to breaking new music.

Punk scholar Russ Bestley (2015) has called for more work on music scenes that includes the perspectives and voices of actors beyond musicians and fans (123), and a wave of recent scholarship takes up this call readily (see Brooks 2021; Farrugia 2012; Hopper 2021; Vilanova and Cassidy 2019).<sup>3</sup> There have been relatively few analyses of those cultural gatekeepers who support and facilitate such music from behind the scenes, as “producers, journalists, A&R men [sic], designers and entrepreneurs” (Bestley 2015, 124), and even fewer accounts of actors beyond the scope of industry positions. Alternative music scenes, notes Bestley, do not happen in a vacuum, despite many of the “standard autobiographies, biographies, histories, diaries” and other accounts of these scenes and spaces continuing to focus on only public-facing individuals (Bestley 2015, 123). I posit that, particularly when talking about genres that are critical of such straightforward hierarchies, such as punk and indie, it becomes doubly important to diversify those voices that are included or — at the very least — considered important. Even if they are not as widely known, these cultural intermediaries have left their mark on history, if one only knows where to look. In a genre like indie, where critiques of professionalism and virtuosity are rampant, why is there still such a dearth of accounts of amateur creatives, cultural intermediaries, and ‘unofficial’ tastemakers? The answer almost certainly has to do with access — the difficulty of unearthing stories trapped, as this one is, in the vestiges of the early and poorly archived

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting, of course, that music bloggers were *also* fans; their musical fandom predates and exists alongside their more direct involvement in the scene.

internet. But also, as I argue in this chapter, some of this silence — not just in this scene, this place, and this time, but across music history — has to do with the ways in which gender and ideas of masculinized authority structure the stories about music that are remembered. This chapter begins by tracing the gendered histories of blogging and rock music writing, before making a case for the ways in which the symbiosis between mainstream media and subcultural internet spaces in the 2000s effectively exposed the artificial exclusivity of what I term the ‘rock critic industrial complex.’

### *Something About Girls and Blogs*

If the gradual spilling over of local music scenes into digital space was inevitable, so too in many ways were the types of people innovating in these new digital spaces. Women’s historically close relationship with new technology and music throughout history is well-documented. Sadie Plant, in her book *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (1997), notes that women have often worked directly with communications technology as secretaries, record keepers, account managers, and as human computers, predisposing them to the early adoption of new technologies (36). Communications scholar Zack Furness (2019), writing on the all-female teams of disc jockeys who staffed popular phone-in music services starting in the 1930s, notes that “much of the grunt work was hidden from the public and done by women who were only known to callers by their first names — a practice meant to protect their anonymity [...] and to also create a bit of a fantasy for their callers.” In other words, women were folded into early technical innovations because of their cheap labour and, over time, this has been reframed as a natural proclivity. This unique relationship to technology is racialized as well as gendered; Lisa Nakamura and other digital media studies scholars who examine race have noted that people of colour (POC) use the internet as more of an

expressive medium than a consumer medium and that — despite utopic imaginings to the contrary — racist and sexist hierarchies continue to exist in online space (2007, 183; McGahan 2008; McGlotten 2013). In short, the history of technology is peppered with evidence that women, POC, and other marginalized groups have taken up new and emerging technologies to “find potential in the in-between places” (Schwartz 2020, 155) and take up space in digital domains with lower barriers to entry and/or mastery.

The former bloggers I spoke with all reported integrating technology into their daily lives early, bolstered by university-provided internet access and an interest in making websites when the worldwide web was still in its nascency.<sup>4</sup> “They didn’t call them blogs [yet],” says Young. “They were just like whatever. So I had done this kind of proto-blogging even in high school... I put together fan sites for musicals or actors that I really liked — stuff like that.” Sarah Lewitinn, too, notes that her interest in the internet predated her decision to start a music blog: “I was already on message boards. I was on *every* message board. Every chat room.” The bloggers’ fandom was already tied up with their experiences of technology and so, when they found the NYC music scene, it just made sense to communicate those interests via the internet as well. Discussing music had quickly become a central aspect of their daily online communications:

NEUSTADTER: I was going to a lot of concerts [and] I would get to work the next morning, get on my IM chat, and all of my friends were asking me, “How was the show last night? How was the show last night?” So I would like type and then copy/paste, because everybody was asking the same questions.

YOUNG: It was a lot easier than the ten-page emails I would write to each one individually. So then I was like, well why don’t I just put it up on a website? And then I could just point people to it and they can like read it and I don’t have to repeat myself ten times. And that’s kind of how it got started.

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<sup>4</sup> For more information on key informants, see Appendix A.



There has always been utopic interpretations of the internet's potential for connection, with the mingling of the personal and the accessible leading to what Lauren Berlant has termed "intimate publics," or "spaces of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general" (2008, viii). The notion of intimate publics has frequently been applied to the digital world (Kanai 2017; Andreassen 2017; Favaro 2017; Dobson, Robards, and Carah 2018) and women's blogging practices in particular (Connell 2012; Schwartz 2016). Akane Kanai notes that a key difference of digital intimate publics lies in the labour involved in do-it-yourself (DIY) participation and the technical skills required to be successful in digital spaces (2017, 298). This is echoed by scholars of punk and indie rock music scenes, who contend that a scene's built-in potential for radical amateurism hardly ensures that such practices will ever emerge. Neither punk nor the internet "has any absolute purchase on the idea that anyone can do it" (Dale 2018, 26). Rather, according to Pete Dale (2018), these spaces aid in the distribution and amplification of amateur creativity that pre-exists those allowances — a truth I see reflected in these bloggers' proclivity for digital tinkering and creativity, even prior to the advent of a cohesive blogging community.

Girls' early adoption of internet technologies often preceded these same technologies' uptake by mainstream media cultures. Lewitinn spent her high school years reading mainstream music publications, and used her familiarity with burgeoning instant messaging technology to land a job at *SPIN*, a New York-based magazine that began publication in 1985 with a focus on alternative and independent music:

I just looked on AOL member directory for "*SPIN Magazine* journalist" to see if I could find anyone. And I found this guy called Marc Spitz and reached out to him and was like, "Can I be your intern?" And so that's how it kind of went from there.

In 2000, *SPIN*'s album of the year was awarded to "your hard drive," in acknowledgement of the impact that file sharing websites such as Napster had on music distribution and listening in the first year of the new millennium (Dolan 2001). Despite the fact that *SPIN* positioned itself as on

the cutting edge — one writer described the magazine as nothing short of a “structure of pop culture resistance” (Finnegan 1999) — this rhetoric of tech savviness did not extend to the uptake of new technologies. According to Lewitinn, “They just didn’t get it. And that’s not against the people at *SPIN*, it’s just *nobody* got it. Nobody got the internet. It was so early. People just thought it was irrelevant.” Lewitinn continued to work at *SPIN* for the next several years, but she and Spitz remained frustrated with how few resources the online division of the magazine was allocated.<sup>5</sup> Her private blog, in many ways, felt like a more immediate way of connecting with an increasingly internet-savvy independent music scene.

There are many interpretations of girls’ seemingly inherent inclination towards blogging and expertise as digital natives/creatives. Much of the scholarly literature on the subject frames girls’ online sociality as a natural extension of other ways in which girls, historically, have formed community and engaged in the process of identity formation, from diary-keeping to zine cultures. Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) suggest that girls’ online journals function as a kind of digital bedroom culture, “reminiscent in their implications for the performance of identity” (31). As well as serving to claim space, they note, customization and design of blogs offer a means through which early adoptees of blogs (the majority of whom were teenage girls<sup>6</sup>) could “exhibit, map, and negotiate their developing sense of identity” (Hodkinson and Lincoln 2008, 33; see also Davis 2009; Bortree 2005; Weber and Dixon 2007; Keller 2015; Mazzarella 2020; Papacharissi 2002). This impulse to use blogging to showcase one’s personal style alongside one’s technical expertise was also evident in my conversations with bloggers. Neustadter reports feeling particularly invested in the aesthetics of her blog:

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<sup>5</sup> See Goodman 2017, ‘I Like This Internet Thing.’

<sup>6</sup> A 2003 study drawing on data from early blogging platforms such as Blogger, LiveJournal, and Xanga found that the majority of blog writers of the time were teenage girls: fifty-one percent of bloggers fell into the age range of 13-19, and 56% were female (Perseus, now offline but cited in Bortree 2005).

I worked in the digital space at the time, so I was very savvy in — well, I was a coder for a couple of years, so I was savvy in coding and design and stuff like that. So I put my site together. The thing that was very important to me was that it looked really good, because I worked in graphic design and digital design. So that’s how I stood out, I felt. My site looked really cool, really well designed. The coding was *impeccable*. So that was sort of like my thing. I was like, “If I’m going to put out [a blog], I don’t want it to be a LiveJournal. I don’t want it to be like a black and white simple thing.”

The importance of blogging culture to youth cultures — and girls in particular — is an aspect of the early internet that feminist scholars have worked to reclaim in the face of scholarship that discounts and even sometimes despairs that blogging and teenage girlhood are so closely intertwined (Perseus, cited in Bortree 2005; Vieta 2003). Yet there is also a tendency to romanticize these same connections between technology and a particular kind of postfeminist, enterprising girlhood. Girls’ studies scholars Catherine Driscoll (1999) and Anita Harris (2003) have both identified the danger in constructing young women as technologically proficient “future girls” — a continuation of the ultimately harmful “girl power” tropes of the 1990s.<sup>7</sup>

While the purpose of this chapter is not to offer a new critique of the relationship between girls and blogging, it is important to acknowledge this history and the place that girls’ and young women’s blogs occupy in an ongoing lineage of girl media cultures that include diaries, zines, and other forms of bedroom culture. The primary difference between these earlier spaces and blogging, of course, is that blogs tend to have a much wider reach and therefore a greater potential audience. “In the nineties they would have been fanzines, but these blogs were accessible all over the world instantly, which meant they were influential,” notes Sheffield (in Goodman 2017, 340). This DIY ethos has been identified explicitly by bloggers and young women working in music writing on the early internet. According to Young, “The internet was

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<sup>7</sup> “Girl power” rhetoric at the close of the 1990s served as inoculation against the “girl crisis” outlined by “anxiety texts” such as Mary Pipher’s *Reviving Ophelia* (Hains 2010; Projansky 2014). For more on post-feminism and the inadvertent harm of ‘girl power’ tropes in the absence of systemic-level analysis, see Gonick 2016; Hains 2010; and Harris 2001, 2003, 2004.

kind of like my zine;” former zinester and Chicago-based music journalist Jessica Hopper has noted similarly that “everything [she] make[s] is like a zine” (Hopper and Powers 2021). The newly significant nature of blogs as media and a form of self-expression located at the intersection of physical and virtual space exists very easily, I argue, as a continuation of girls’ media cultures — and inspire many of the same anxieties (see Driscoll and Gregg 2008).<sup>8</sup> Girls’ blogs have been identified by music historians as key aspects of urban music scenes like New York’s — Young, Neustadter, and Lewitinn were all interviewed for Lizzy Goodman’s expansive oral history of the 2000s New York City rock scene *Meet Me in the Bathroom* (2017), which is where I first learned about them.<sup>9</sup> Rather than explore these blogs’ value as artifacts of an early internet, however, I want to place this archive in conversation with a longer history of rock writing to make the argument that early music blogs actually offer a critique of traditional, masculinist rock criticism.

### ***The Rock Press***

The dedication page of Jessica Hopper’s 2015 collection, *The First Collection of Criticism by a Living Female Rock Critic*, answers the reader’s first question in short order: “The title of this book is not entirely accurate.” Hopper goes on to cite Ellen Willis’ *Beginning to See the Light* (1981), along with her posthumous collection *Out of the Vinyl Deeps*, not published until 2011. She mentions Lillian Roxon, commissioned to write what became the world’s first rock encyclopedia in the late ‘60s, an endeavor which resulted in the rapid deterioration of Roxon’s health and her eventual premature death from asthma complications in 1973. She also

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<sup>8</sup> As girls’ studies scholars have also observed, forms of culture associated with girls (like early blogs) are uniquely susceptible to anxieties and concerns around girls’ safety, privacy, and agency.

<sup>9</sup> The bloggers appear briefly in a chapter of MMITB dedicated to the impact of the internet on music media more generally but — according to at least one blogger — were included in the project as almost an afterthought. See also Campbell 2019.

mentions Caroline Coon, whose writing for *Melody Maker* was eventually collected and published as a book in 1977, and who also provided the artwork for a number of influential British rock groups of the era, even briefly managing The Clash. “We should be able to list a few dozen more,” notes Hopper (2015), “But those books don’t exist. Yet.”

What Hopper’s brief sketch of female rock critics throughout history never says explicitly is that prolific authors like Willis, Roxon, and Coon represented the absolute upper echelons of women music writers; the ones able to claw their way through over a decade of underpaid work as critics for music weeklies until their CVs were impressive enough to earn them the more legitimized task of writing or editing a book. “A lot of these folks didn’t go on to long or distinguished careers,” remarked Hopper in 2021, on tour for the newly expanded edition of her 2015 collection. “There’s just been like a wholesale erasure because patriarchy doesn’t want us to know that anyone existed before us, so that we can’t connect with their struggle and build on their knowledge.” There has been a recent, vibrant swell of scholarship dedicated to excavating these histories.<sup>10</sup> Daphne Brooks’ *Liner Notes for the Revolution* (2021) and Hanif Abdurraqib’s *A Little Devil in America* (2021) are both sweeping recent book projects dedicated to highlighting stories of Black cultural interlocutors and artists alike. Brooks’ work in particular pushes back against normative understandings of where music criticism happens, taking up album liner notes as a vibrant site of women’s music writing, despite only three women receiving a Grammy for this work since the award’s inception in 1964 (Brooks 2021a; 2021b).<sup>11</sup> Culture studies scholar Kimberly Mack engages in similar excavation work in her paper for 2021’s

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<sup>10</sup> There have also been efforts to better organize and popularize the writing that already exists, but has escaped popularity and memory by virtue of who wrote it. Jessica Hopper and Sasha Geffen, author of *Glitter Up the Dark: How Pop Music Broke the Binary* (2020), have worked together to compile a list of books about music by women, trans, and non-binary authors. The list, available on Hopper’s publisher’s website, includes over 400 titles and includes a link for readers to suggest additions and amendments.

<sup>11</sup> Jazz historian Maxine Gordon has referred to liner notes as an “old boys network,” placing the genre solidly in league with other forms of male-dominated music writing (in Brooks 2021b).

PopCon, which focused on the story of Cynthia Dagnal-Myron, the first Black woman to write about rock for a major daily newspaper when she joined the staff of the *Chicago Sun Times* in the 1970s, and who also wrote for major outlets such as *Creem* and *Rolling Stone*. In order to appreciate the historical trajectory of women in music writing and eventually land back with our 2000s NYC bloggers, we need to take a slight detour and trace the institutionalization and professionalization of music writing and the ways in which this pursuit historically been marked by passion, fannishness, enthusiasm, and emotion — long the domain of fangirls — became a task suitable only for self-serious men.

As Iain Chambers (1985) explains, “the idea of a ‘thinking person’s rock music’ emerged in the late 1960s, at the same time as the professional rock critic ‘appeared to legitimate the whole affair’” (in Davies 2001, 84). Like other areas of the music industry, the look and feel of rock criticism underwent a significant shift as rock music was eventually folded into the mainstream and began to be taken seriously. Many women writers were victims of the professionalization of rock writing in the 80s, when *Rolling Stone* and other leading music magazines “purged many of its quirkiest writers” and rock criticism went mainstream (McDonnell and Powers 1995, 16). “The business became increasingly important and straight journalism caught on, so there began to be rock critics at the daily papers,” notes Robert Christgau, who spent almost four decades as the senior music critic at *The Village Voice*. “It became a profession that people thought they could do [and] the room for amateur fannishness diminished” (in McDonnell and Powers 1995, 16). In a 1976 piece for the paper, Christgau coined the term “rock critic establishment” to describe the growth in influence of American rock critics who — despite lacking the same infrastructural support that British music writers had by virtue of the “weeklies,” a style and rhythm of publishing that never quite caught on in North

America (McLeod 2001, 48) — existed as celebrities in their own right.<sup>12</sup> This rock critic establishment (or rock critic industrial complex, if you like) essentially established norms for music writing that prioritized and valued objectivity above all else, a move that had everything to do with gender.<sup>13</sup> Women writers were fired and women wanting to work at major music magazines were relegated, as Susin Shapiro noted in her 1975 analysis of feminism in rock for *Crawdaddy*, to “secretaries and subscription managers — the unsung, unslung heroes” (in McDonnell and Powers 1995, 7). This shift effectively canonized rock criticism as a masculine domain, relegating women wanting to work for these same publications to support staff or as tokenized writers brought in specifically to criticize female performers (see Davies 2001, 310).

And these new impositions of objectivity *were* impositions. Karen Durbin, a writer for *The Village Voice* and most well-known for an in-depth profile she did of the Rolling Stones in 1975, remarked that “criticism [had] lost touch with the pleasure principle” (in McDonnell and Powers 1995, 16). The first wave of rock criticism had been largely built upon the deep emotional and affective ties writers felt towards their subjects. As Ann Powers reflects in *Rock She Wrote* (McDonnell and Powers 1995, 464): “What was rock writing if not personal?” She goes on, noting that:

Its pioneers, so often speaking in the first-person of their emotional as well as intellectual engagement with the music, rejected the notion of a clear, authoritative interpretive method from the beginning. It was hardly surprising, then, that women writing about

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<sup>12</sup> Cameron Crowe, a young reporter from the first wave of *Rolling Stone* writers during the 1970s, went on to write and direct *Almost Famous* (Columbia 2000), loosely based on Crowe’s own experiences following a band on tour as a young music writer. The film has since become a quintessential piece of music journalist/rock critic myth-making; literally every single blogger I interviewed mentioned the film or made a comparison to one of its characters in our conversations.

<sup>13</sup> Although, as Hopper explains in a 2018 piece for *Vanity Fair*, many of these newly established norms at outlets such as *Rolling Stone* only came about because of women in the first place. Sarah Lazin, Christine Doudna, Barbara Downey Landau, Marianne Partridge, Vicki Sufian, and Harriet Fier were the first six women to make it to the publication’s masthead in 1973, when they formed the magazine’s Copy and Research desk and effectively instituted a formal editorial process and cohesive journalistic style guide. All but Fier were interviewed for the piece; she passed away the day before Hopper was set to interview her, highlighting the urgency of excavating these stories and the countless insights that have already been lost by waiting even this long.

music in the late sixties and early seventies brought what they'd learned about subjectivity and sexism to their critical work.

Whether or not there was ever a discernible difference in the ways that men and women initially embodied these early impulses to write about music from “a decidedly personal, emotional, biased, gossipy point of view” (Lisa Robinson, in McDonnell and Powers 1995, 11), it was women writers who were cast out as rock criticism began to coalesce around masculinized logics and objectivity. By the end of the ‘80s, according to Durbin, “you wouldn’t know it’s music to move to — rock criticism is more overwhelmingly male than rock itself” (in McDonnell and Powers 1995, 16). Standards of good writing and good music alike had become wholly male-defined, based in the “cool, detached appraisal” of performers (Davies 2001, 312), while so-called teenyboppers and women were ridiculed for their emotional involvement in the same music.

This paradigm shift led to a consistently hostile and largely homogenous music writing culture until the advent of internet-based music journalism.<sup>14</sup> Music magazines continued to have gross gender imbalances; at *Music Maker* magazine in the UK, men outnumbered women by more than two to one, with female journalists assigned the least glamorous tasks, such as reviewing readers’ demo tapes (Davies 2001, 301).<sup>15</sup> Davies notes that “the sexism of the music press is self-perpetuating,” with journalists often writing as if their audiences were entirely male (2001, 316). These attitudes were also echoed in music scholarship of the time. Simon Frith (1978) claimed that “the lack of female interest in ‘serious’ rock is relieved clearly in the

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<sup>14</sup> Although, as William O’Hara explores in his 2018 article on “the new thinkpiece regime,” the internet brought with it some equally prescriptive and troubling ways of discussing music.

<sup>15</sup> Although, as Lewitinn points out, interns and other support staff are often the employees with the most unfettered access to demos and effectively control what executives and writers at these publications end up listening to. “It was [other] interns and assistants that were the ones that were turning me on to music,” notes Lewitinn, who discovered both Interpol and the Strokes demos in this way, “Because they were the ones that had to listen to everything.” Underpaid interns became the tastemakers almost by default and, by extension, it was these other music workers that Lewitinn trusted to turn her on to new music.



readership patterns of the music press,” before going on to quote statistics showing that one third of readers were in fact female (151). Thus, despite the systematic and deeply entrenched exclusion of female music writers from the mastheads of rock music publications, girls and women continued to make up a significant proportion of these same publications’ readerships — a statistic I saw reflected in my conversations with former bloggers. All four women reported a long, often passionate history of engagement with mainstream music press, regularly consuming these magazines up to and including their time writing blogs.

As the ‘90s drew to a close, the nascent internet was already emerging as a new and fertile ground for music journalism due, in no small part, to mainstream print publications’ distrust of this new space. “Print publications were extremely guarded about the internet,” remembers Ryan Schreiber, founder of *Pitchfork*. “And their lateness allowed us, allowed *Pitchfork*, to establish ourselves as the authority because there was no other existing authority on the internet” (in Goodman 2017, 339). Started in 1996 by Schreiber when he was just a recent high school graduate, *Pitchfork* is a site focused around reviewing new music and bands using an infamous 10-point rating system; its launch has been named by the Guardian as one of their top fifty moments to define indie rock history (Lynskey 2011). At first averaging just 300 hits a day, by 2006 *Pitchfork* was seeing more than 160,000 unique visitors per day (Thomas 2006) and had developed a reputation as “a cultural assassin” (Itzkoff 2006) and the main arbiter of taste among independent music fans, replacing more analog tastemaking channels such as zines, college radio stations, and print music magazines (Brasher 2013; Delloro 2012; Wodtke 2008). The so-called “*Pitchfork* effect” filled a yawning gap in the North American music press where, in the absence of smaller, more regular publications like the UK weeklies, print media was ill-equipped (and often unwilling to risk advertising dollars) to cover unknown bands. The success of *Pitchfork*

spurred a wave of online music publications and triggered a wave of panic over the demise of the traditional music press — in a string of catastrophizing headlines, journalists wondered ‘Is music journalism dead?’ (Powers 2004), “Do they still want their MTV?” (Carr 2007), “Is the party over for the *NME*?” (Dalton 2008), and even resignedly declared “The death of *Rolling Stone*” (Elder 2002). The answer to all of these questions was, of course, a resounding *not yet*, but print media did begin to look to internet music writing for clues as to where to go next. Even *Rolling Stone*, a publication that had defined the scope of rock journalism and was loathe to see it evolve in any way, noted that indie rock was a tool capable of restoring highbrow credibility and, by 2007, had effectively doubled their coverage of indie (Brasher 2013, 50).<sup>16</sup> Other outlets, including the historically astute UK weeklies, went straight to the source and tapped the bloggers themselves.

### ***Subcultural Tastemaking (and Appropriation)***

The intensely embedded nature of bloggers meant that they represented a rich resource for those factions of the mainstream music press who did not have access to these scenes firsthand. Imran Ahmed was the new bands editor of *New Music Enquiry (NME)*, a UK-based publication that had been consistently providing coverage of alternative and independent rock music since the 1950s. Ahmed (in Goodman 2017, 336) was one of the first editors to defy this assumption that music blogs meant the end of music weeklies by tapping into bloggers’ abilities to discover new music:

I was very aware of the New York music bloggers. I used to look at the *Modern Age* blog every day. [Young] was like the New York arm of what we were doing in the UK, but

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<sup>16</sup> These shifts were not always received well by the magazine’s established readership. One response notes that, in trying to reach a younger audience, *Rolling Stone* was contorting itself into something wholly unrecognizable. “Without that contrary attitude — or any attitude for the most part — *Rolling Stone* seems like an anachronism, the Ladies’ Home Journal of rock journalism” (Elder 2002). This gendered language betrays the patriarchal bent of traditional rock criticism, certainly, but it also exposes another truth of rock subcultures: rockists conflate contrarian opinions with taste and are desperate to hold onto waning subcultural capital at any cost, even if it means eschewing the return of what they perceived as a less disciplined or discerning mode of music writing.

because she was much more in the thick of it, she would go out and take photos of the White Stripes and the Strokes doing stuff in New York and it seemed really relevant.

As the New York scene began to solidify, more legitimate journalists and publications began to take note. According to Sheffield, “All of us at every level of music journalism were paying attention to what they had to say” (in Goodman 2017, 343). *NME* and other UK publications were soon regularly tapping the New York blogs for news of upcoming bands, a move that the bloggers reported never felt exploitative but certainly took some getting used to. According to Young:

The first time that a publication reached out to me, I was like kind of confused. [laughs] A little bit like, how did they even find this? You know, they’re all the way on the other side of the ocean. And, you know, I’m just in New York doing my thing. And obviously I was aware of *NME* — I mean, they were a huge publication that was covering, you know, the bands that I really liked — but the fact that they knew about *me* was really very shocking.

Eventually confusion gave way to excitement, and the UK weeklies and New York blogs built an unlikely media ecosystem where bloggers provided the magazines with photos and writeups of local shows. “I was writing for a London online magazine that was like astonishingly well-paid for how you think about writing,” remembers Pines, who had at this point enrolled as a journalism major at Columbia. “It was trying to encapsulate what was special about the scene for people who weren’t there, [because] we knew it wasn’t going to last. And it didn’t. So it needed to be documented.”

Male bloggers were also involved in these scenes, but their blogs were often more focused on content that approximated conventional rock criticism or functioned as MP3 blogs, centered on the distribution and promotion of new music via sharing newly popularized MP3 files widely and often for free (see Wodtke 2008).<sup>17</sup> Girl bloggers’ ethos was more in line with

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<sup>17</sup> Male bloggers also tended to professionalize their blogs more readily; in New York, the two most prevalent examples of this phenomenon were Product Shop NYC (Jason Gordon) and Stereogum (Scott Lapatine). Music

earlier, by now mostly forgotten tenets of rock writing that embrace the messy, emotive, and deeply personal connections they felt to these bands and this scene.<sup>18</sup> All of the music bloggers I interviewed remarked upon their commitment to only speak about bands they genuinely loved, a function of the fannish ethos that underscored so much of this work but also, as Pines points out, a question of logistics. “For me to go home from a show and at two o’clock in the morning write down all my thoughts,” she reflects wryly, “I would have to be pretty enthusiastic about it.” This discernment was well-known by others in the scene. “If [the bloggers] didn’t like a band, they just didn’t write about them,” notes Sheffield. “There was absolutely no way to bullshit these girls” (in Goodman 2017, 343). This type of fannish discernment meant that bloggers were more likely to have their tastemaking power taken seriously by mainstream outlets relying on their knowledge of the scene. According to Lewitinn:

I remember there were times when a friend who was like an A&R person at a record label would be like, “Hey Sarah, could you turn your blogger friends onto this song? Can you turn your blogger friends on to this band or that band?” And like that was always like a very weird situation. And I just remembered that that would happen. It would be like the professionals being like, “Hey, could you get your friends to listen to this?” And it wasn’t like — they weren’t asking me to turn on the editors and writers at *SPIN Magazine*. They were asking me to turn on the bloggers that were just doing it for fun, which is such a weird situation.

The music press was, in many ways, simply never going to be able to approximate the authenticity and social capital of blogs and — recognizing this — worked to incorporate the bloggers into the tastemaking ‘flows’ of the industry. This is hardly an isolated incidence of publications tapping into more underground media to bolster their own credibility. According to

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writing conventions, however, meant that this writing/coverage had a markedly different tone than the less professional bloggers; according to Sheffield, “There were boys doing [blogs], too, but it really seems like it was the girls who were the tastemakers” (in Goodman 2017, 341).

<sup>18</sup> Bloggers were also acutely aware of the tonal differences between the writing on their blogs and that of male peers. Lewitinn, remarking on how her writing changed after she became aware of how influential her blog was, notes that, “It turned me into a *guy*, essentially. Like the criticism that I had of men in the blogging space, in the music world, ended up — I ended up becoming, because I just became so aware and so handicapped by a responsibility that didn’t actually exist. And didn’t *have* to exist.”

Sarah Thornton (1995), “consumer magazines accrue credibility by affiliating themselves with subcultures, but also contribute to the authentication of cultural forms in the process of covering and constructing subcultures” (236). In other words, the impulse of publications like *NME* to draw on bloggers’ expertise is self-serving, inasmuch as it uses “underground tributaries” (Thornton 1995, 235) to sustain readerships, but it also ultimately serves to legitimate and codify the scene from which these tributaries flow — in this case, New York City indie rock. Dick Hebdige wrote in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) that all subcultures invariably end with “the simultaneous diffusion and defusion of subcultural style,” as the mass culture co-opts them piece by piece (93). The earliest waves of subcultural theory could hardly have foreseen the possibilities for diffusion afforded by a technology like the internet, nor do such theories account for the re-obfuscation that takes place as these records of DIY music writing are lost to ephemeral internet archives and oversimplified histories.

Deeply influential female music writers and tastemakers have always existed; their absence from most accounts of subcultural history can be linked to the fact that they have existed in places delegitimized or distrusted by the rock industrial complex that continues to put its faith in outdated infrastructure and systems of value.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps the saddest testament to the ways in which these structures are self-perpetuating and harrowingly exclusive lies in the fact that none of the bloggers interviewed for this chapter are still writing about music, and only one works with music in any significant way. Young reports interviewing for an editorial assistant position at *Rolling Stone*, but lost interest when she found out that she would be more responsible for

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<sup>19</sup> This constellation of rockist/masculinist bodies is also frequently nebulous and interconnected. Jann Wenner, co-founder of *Rolling Stone*, banded together with a small group of record company executives and music industry professionals to found the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1983. The Hall has attracted attention for the overwhelming whiteness and maleness of its inductees; these critiques are explored at length on the podcast *Who Cares About the Rock Hall?*, hosted by Joe Kwaczala and Kristen Studard.

more menial tasks like making the office coffee than shaping coverage. “I didn’t love it *that* much,” she admits. “And didn’t really want to be in a space where I’m starting off undervalued and then continuing to be undervalued. And every single step of the way it being a struggle or trying to like prove yourself in some way.” As the scene changed towards the end of the 2000s, bloggers pursued creative but non-music-related careers,<sup>20</sup> as the values and community-driven ethos that fueled their blogs refused to translate to fulltime work in mainstream publications or other industry positions.

Still, the interconnected and frequently symbiotic nature of the mainstream music press and blogs during the early years of the internet exposes the artificial exclusivity of what we might term the rock industrial complex. And while many of the online publications started around this time went on to embody this same rockist objectivity — one need only look at the spate of controversies around ‘unfair’ *Pitchfork* reviews in the past few years to see that these attitudes are still well and truly intact — the fact remains that music blogging presented girls and otherwise marginalized music fans unprecedented access to tastemaking spaces, before the internet had really organized enough to shut them down. “It was almost like men had not figured out that women were there yet,” reflects Pines. “And because we were all doing it together, there was no real concern that we weren’t going to be taken seriously because the only people whose opinions mattered were the other music bloggers.” In a scene as riotous as New York City’s, on an internet as small as it was ever going to feel, a handful of blogs had a very real impact on music history. And they did it with and for their friends.

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<sup>20</sup> Pines lived abroad in Berlin as a freelance writer for some time, before returning to New York where she continues to do freelance writing and content marketing; Young has moved to Denver where she works as a food writer; Neustadter went back to school for fashion and eventually moved to Los Angeles to start a family; and Lewitinn worked for various marketing companies in New York before also moving to LA to work as a music director for a clothing company, programming music for retail stores.

## *Conclusions*

Ethnographies of music scenes, like subcultural studies, tend to see media as outside authentic culture (Thornton 1995, 186). They romanticize softer forms of infrastructure and “give positive valuation to the ‘culture of the people’ but only at the cost of removing the media from their pictures of the cultural process” (ibid). The distinctions between media and scene are frequently messy, however, and — as I have attempted to argue here — often exist in a feedback loop wherein subcultural spaces enabled by scenes and emerging technology are folded into mainstream publishing and media. We need more histories that acknowledge this messiness, for while there’s been a steady push to tell the stories of female fans and musicians, far less nuance has been given to the cultural intermediaries existing in these more liminal or less easily defined spaces. Ann Powers noted in the ‘90s that “many writers have championed the front-row girl, insisting that female fans be acknowledged and respected” (McDonnell and Powers 1998, 462). This project of uncovering female fans’ stories and impact has only grown over time, often spearheaded by grownup fans — in the last few years alone, we’ve gotten Hannah Ewens’ *Fangirls* (2019) and Maria Sherman’s *Larger Than Life* (2020), both released to critical acclaim and much commercial success.<sup>21</sup> But what about when the writers *are* the front-row girls? And manage the band? And are also DJing the afterparty (see Chapter 5)? “Without a recognition of those women documenting the spirit of the music,” writes Brooks (2021b), “We lose a crucial piece of the history of the music itself as it was received and felt by women listeners — the sometimes invisible critics who, nevertheless, have their own stories to tell.” These histories might be more difficult to trace after a time, but they also refuse to disappear entirely. As Sheffield (in Goodman 2017, 341) vividly recalls:

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<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting, however, that most writing on fangirls focuses on pop music and not indie rock.

I remember when Yeah Yeah Yeahs were on the cover of *The Face*, and in the story there was a photo Nick Zinner took onstage with Karen [O] rocking out at Bowery Ballroom and the photo cracked me up because you could see all these faces in the front row who were NYC rock-girl bloggers — Audrey from *Melody Nelson*, Laura from the *Modern Age*...

The stories and photographs shared by the New York bloggers illuminated a scene and a moment in music history that would have almost certainly been underdocumented otherwise — due to the insular nature of the scene, the slow uptake from mainstream media, but also just the limitations of 2000s-era tech. According to Young:

I remember just like elbowing my way to the front. Which I'm usually able to, because I'm small. I'm only 5'1", and I'm little. So usually there's not a lot of push back, but I remember at times whenever I would get [challenged], I remember thinking to myself, "I'm going to take a better photo—" Because at the time I had a digital SLR. Like, "I'm going to take a better photo of this than your terrible Motorola Razr phone and I'm going to put it on the internet and share with you. Like you should let me in front because I'm doing *you* a service!"

I argue here that this is not a singular case, but just one slightly more visible example of girls doing what girls have always done best: loving music so hard that, for at least a brief time, it takes over every aspect of their lives. If anything, 2000s music blogs feel remarkable because they're a case study from a more uncensored, undefined — and therefore more easily romanticized — internet than the one we know now, where a girl with a blog could get straight to the point and always be guaranteed the best shot of the night. "Always be pushing," Young laughs. "Always be pushing to the front."



## Chapter Five

### PLAYLIST

This playlist features musicians who were imports to the larger urban indie rock scenes of the 2000s, and who saw their success bolstered by the nascent internet and the ways in which it blurred the boundaries of physical distance and music discovery practices.

#### 1. **When You Were Young — The Killers (2006)**

Somebody asked me recently what my favourite music documentary was, and it only took a beat for me to name the *Song Exploder* episode focused on this song. Based on the popular music podcast created by Hrishikesh Hirway, in 2020 the show began releasing short episodes on Netflix that follow artists talking about hit songs, the song-writing process, and music production. In the Killers episode, frontman Brandon Flowers and his bandmates reflect on how, following the rabid success of 2004's *Hot Fuss*, there was mounting pressure for the band to deliver with their sophomore album. WYWY was the first single off *Sam's Town* (2006) and, according to Flowers, watching this very personal tribute to the band's Las Vegas roots climb the charts was "the moment [they] knew it was all going to be okay." This album was one of exactly two CDs my family had on hand for a long, winding road trip with no radio reception in 2007, which means that I have both baked in nostalgia for the album as a whole and a weirder and closer than usual relationship to many of its songs. But I still dare anyone to watch *Song Exploder* and listen to Flowers' soft voice hitch when he talks about writing a song called "When We Were Young" at 25 and not feel *something*.

#### 2. **Fell in Love With a Girl — The White Stripes (2002)**

The White Stripes is one of those rare bands that *feel* like a 2000s band even though they got their start a few years earlier; as bands like the Strokes and Yeah Yeah Yeahs were

finding footholds in the scene, they were already on their third album. The band imported a choppy, grittier sound to the New York scene from their native Detroit and — while most of their songs are short — this single clocks in at just under a tight two minutes. The band was notable for only having two musicians, ex-spouses Jack and Meg White, which drastically limited the number and scope of the instruments they could play and contributed to their signature low-fidelity sound. The White Stripes' legacy is also shaped by varying attitudes towards its two members — Jack is frequently upheld as a talented songwriter and multi-hyphenate artist, while Meg's musical talent has been subject to harsh critique and she is largely blamed for the band's eventual dissolution. My friend's dad, a drum teacher and a veteran of the downtown Toronto music scene, once fired a fourteen-year-old student of his after they badmouthed Meg's drumming technique and — while admittedly a bit harsh — I think the music world could use a little more of that kind of attitude.

### **3. Take Me Out — Franz Ferdinand (2004)**

There is a sticky-floored, dimly lit club space above the historic Lee's Palace music venue on Toronto's Bloor Street called Dance Cave or, if you're in the know, 'the Cave.' The Cave is a five minute walk from my apartment. The Cave is often overrun with University of Toronto undergrads because, notably, the Cave does not charge a cover if you are a student. While I'm well past my prime Cave-going days now, one of my fondest memories will always be the inevitable moment when, sensing their audience, the DJ would throw on this Franz Ferdinand song and — at exactly one minute and four seconds into the track — you could feel the wooden dance floor and stage (the Cave has a stage) start quaking as hundreds of millennial feet began to stomp in unison along to the

shifting guitar riffs. I can only imagine it had a similar effect when the Glasgow rock band started playing gigs in New York and other hotbeds of North American indie rock as this song and associated album climbed the international charts for much of 2004.

#### **4. 1901 — Phoenix (2009)**

Another European import to North American indie culture, Phoenix formed in the late '90s practicing out of vocalist Thomas Mars' garage in the suburbs of Paris. "1901" is the lead single from their fourth studio album and, along with the album opener "Lisztomania," is one of the band's most well-known songs due to a slew of licensing and sync placements following its release. The single was originally released as a free MP3 download from the band's website, before going on to appear in episodes of shows like *Gossip Girl*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *Melrose Place*; television advertisements for PlayStation and Cadillac; soundtracks for the *NHL 2K10* and *NBA 2K13* video games; a track for both *Rock Band* (2009) and *Guitar Hero* (2010); and the default music for the "Modern" template in the iOS version of video editing software iMovie. The ubiquity of this track in late 2009 and 2010 speaks both to a growing taste for indie rock/pop in mainstream and commercial spaces, along with a growing tolerance for licensing and sync among indie group's existing fanbases as the contours and expectations of the industry continued to shift. The band continues to actively collaborate with brands, write new music, and — as of late 2019 — also co-authored the music memoir slash retrospective *Phoenix: Liberté, Égalité, Phoenix!* alongside *Guardian* deputy music editor and *Pitchfork* contributor Laura Snapes.

#### **5. A-Punk — Vampire Weekend (2008)**

Vampire Weekend came towards the tail end of the New York City indie rock boom,

emerging out of close friendships between its four founding members after meeting at Columbia University. “I went to all of their early shows at like the frat houses,” laughs former music blogger Giulia Pines, who notes that by that point — late 2006 — she had taken a step back from the music scene to focus on finishing her journalism degree. “It was just this weird thing where it’s like, ‘Oh, I guess that’s one more band I saw first.’” A well-established ecosystem of music blogs and online music publications helped the nascent band gain attention and they were eventually declared “The Year’s Best Band” by *SPIN* in the March 2008 issue, making history as the first band to be shot for the cover before releasing their debut album. One writeup of the band’s Grammy-winning *Father of the Bride* (2019) notes that Vampire Weekend “may be the most important band of the ‘00s still operating at the end of the ‘10s” — a bold claim about a project that started out as a rap collaboration featuring frontman Ezra Koenig and drummer Chris Tomson named “L’Homme Run” with a rambling five minute track (still mercifully findable on YouTube) about pizza.

#### **6. When You Were Young — Press Club (2018)**

Australian band Press Club’s cover of the Killer’s classic is notable for the way in which — unlike a lot of other female vocalists’ covers of rock songs with original male vocals — singer Natalie Foster doesn’t for one second try to slow down or soften the sonic qualities of the original song. The growl in Foster’s voice as she accuses the listener of sitting in their heartache, *waiting for some beautiful boy*, reads as commiseratory rather than Flower’s original, quasi-pitying delivery. It’s every road trip shoutalong and middle-of-the-dancefloor release rolled into one as the lead riff wavers and bends around her words. Rather than capitulating to the trend of acoustic female covers, the result is just as

punchy and octane-fuelled as the original; when Foster sings *burning down the highway skyline on the back of a hurricane*, the textures of her voice echo the squeal of the tires.

## In the Eye of the Tornado: MP3 Cultures and the Digital Scene

### CHAPTER FIVE

I always think of each night as a song. Or each moment as a song. But now I'm seeing we don't live in a single song. We move from song to song, from lyric to lyric, from chord to chord. There is no ending here. It's an infinite playlist.

— *Nick & Norah's Infinite Playlist* (Cohn and Levithan 2006), 173-174

In a recent interview, Chicago-based music journalist Jessica Hopper was asked to reflect on the early days of her career as a multihyphenate music enthusiast who tried everything from making zines to working at record labels on her journey to music writing. “I made a minor living as a DJ in the aughts,” she noted (Hopper and Abdurraqib 2021). “But didn't we all.” Hopper's throwaway comment speaks to the widespread phenomenon in the early and mid-2000s of young people, bolstered by their knowledge of emergent technologies and burgeoning MP3 cultures, engaging in their local music scenes, not just as fans, but as cultural intermediaries and music workers in their own right. Marginalized music fans who had historically been kept out of mainstream music publications were finding ways to publish music writing online via blogs (see Chapter 4), and their embeddedness in local scenes — along with their growing reputation as tastemakers — frequently led to other opportunities. “iPods had just been invented,” notes Rob Sheffield, then and now a music journalist at *Rolling Stone*. “Almost all these girls were part-time DJs, which was now suddenly [a job] that required zero technical skills or record-collecting tendencies” (in Goodman 2017, 342). The musical expertise of young, marginalized music fans like Hopper and the DJs referenced by Sheffield circulated and moved between on- and offline spaces in a gig economy facilitated by the early internet's key role in local music scenes.

The advent of the internet saw a rapid-fire renegotiation of who had access to cultural capital; in New York City, where Sarah Lewitinn worked for *SPIN Magazine* in the 2000s while also writing her own music blog, this erosion of traditional tastemaking structures was especially

evident. “Basically before, there was a very limited amount of gatekeepers,” notes Lewitinn (in Campbell 2019). “You had MTV, you had the radio, you had the music magazine and then that was basically it.” As conversations about music began to take over more unconventional and wholly new spaces, this tastemaking power became more dispersed. All of a sudden, remembers Lewitinn, “there’s no gate [...] it’s like a flood” (in Campbell 2019). Audrey Neustadter, a friend of Lewitinn’s in the tight knit New York City indie rock scene, started a blog to document the concerts she was attending, never expecting that her online writing would lead to other opportunities. “It started with managers and PR people reaching out to me, just sending me music [and] inviting me to shows because they wanted me to talk about their bands,” recalls Neustadter, a recent college graduate at the time. “And it occurred to me that I was becoming a tastemaker, that people trusted me.”<sup>1</sup> According to Lewitinn, the move from blogging to more direct involvement in the scene tended to happen organically:

I think, you know, when you’re writing about shows all the time and meeting all these bands and talking to promoters, they kind of start coming to you with opportunities. So sometimes it would be a promoter being like, “Hey, you know I’ve got this club night. Do you want to DJ?” You know, because they read my blog and they knew what my taste was. [...] And, you know, I hardly DJed, but I figured it out. And then it was like, “Do you want to have some bands play?” So it was all very organic. When the scene started erupting and everyone was connected through blogging, it was just easier to call upon your friends and be like, “Hey, I’ve got this party. Do you want to come slash do you want to DJ it?” And so you’d DJ it and you’d promote it. It was a very, very organic thing where you’re just calling your friends to help out, because you just wanted to have a fun party.

The blurry boundaries between tastemaker’s online presence and their offline roles as organizers, venue bookers, managers, and DJs challenged, in many ways, the artificial exclusivity of a male-dominated music scene. Particular to the 2000s, however, this trend of young people who might not otherwise find themselves in these roles was also inarguably facilitated by particular material

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on key informants, see Appendix A.

conditions, namely, the rise of MP3 cultures and early internet users' technical literacy. "There were a lot of girls — some bloggers and some non-bloggers — who became these 'play DJs,'" laughs Neustadter. "There [were] so many of us. It became like a real thing, all of us DJing. And real DJs *hated* it." The extent to which these new ways of tastemaking and the blurriness between on- and offline worlds threatened convention; a sure sign that something interesting and even potentially radical was taking place.

This chapter explores how emergent MP3 and digital cultures offered an overdue challenge to exclusionary music cultures founded on record-collecting and the subcultural capital (after Thornton) of live music. By grounding this concluding chapter in the importance of space and place that shapes so many aspects of indie rock cultures (see Chapter 1), I argue that it is possible to read this cultural shift as a moment of reinterpreting indie rock as a social practice first and foremost. I begin with an exploration of scene studies before tracing those emergent technologies that facilitated the blurring of boundaries between online and offline music spaces. MP3 cultures and file-sharing software, like so many other technologies explored over the course of this dissertation, were not preconditions for a sudden influx of marginalized music workers and innovation in the 2000s; rather than understanding this moment of technological shift as a fluke, I trace the history of marginalized DJs and connect this to questions of expanding spaces in 2000s urban indie rock scenes. Finally, I consider the role of online and offline intimacies, a cultural 'backstage,' and the role of aura and authenticity in determining how we understand our music — its production, distribution, and our own consumption of it. How have technologies historically drawn and redrawn the boundaries of physical music scenes and spaces? How do socio-historical notions of authenticity inform what we think of as 'real' music and cultural labour? And finally, what is the value of an indie scene with a rapidly shrinking 'backstage'?



## *Beyond Physical Scenes*

The notion of scene was already changing and ‘thickening’ at the turn of the millennium.<sup>2</sup> Subculture studies had long been critiqued for the ways in which the field worked to obscure, rather than illuminate, the complexities of cultural and social practices (Willis 1990; Redhead 1990; Bennett 1999). The shift towards understanding subcultures via local scenes “acknowledges that different interpretive tools are called for to account for the many layered circuits, loose affiliations, networks, contexts, and points of contact determining the socio-musical experience” (Stahl 2004, 52). The elasticity and “fundamental ambiguity” (Blum 2001, 33) of the term enables a more nuanced analysis and allows for thicker description of the “extensive inter-related networks, circuits, and alliances formed both inside and outside the city” that constitute a scene (Stahl 2004, 54). In other words, narrowing discussions of music cultures to the level of a city or a local scene provides a kind of “semantic latitude” that can help widen the depth of analysis (Stahl 2004, 52), folding in actors and sites that other approaches might leave out. While scholars such as Will Straw initially conceptualized a scene as a range of practices within a “bounded cultural space” (1991, 380), ‘scene’ later developed into a concept used to describe the participatory nature of “particular clusters of social and cultural activity” (2004, 412). According to scene scholars, the usefulness of the term lies in its flexibility and capacity to capture “the peripheral energies and relationships that exist around visible subcultures” (Drysdale 2015, 346). In this way, scene gestures to something beyond the obvious, moving from physical locations and cityscapes into peripheral and liminal spaces to capture the energies that animate subcultural space.

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<sup>2</sup> The thick description that I refer to here originates in ethnography and in Clifford Geertz’s (1973) conviction that ethnographic work should resist reducing culture to “menial observations;” thick description of music spaces and ‘scenes’ is integral to nuanced discussions of community, relationality, and even genre (Sanchez-Dorado 2020).

Scene carries with it a fundamental association with place and physical proximity (Shaw 2013, 335). Particularly in indie music scenes, “where bands come from and where they produce their music are significant aspects of how they register in the imagination of fans and other music-makers” (Stahl 2004, 55). The emergence of place studies and a renewed emphasis on the conceptualization of urban space and its connections to culture mirrors, in many ways, the indie conviction that the *where* and not just the *what* of what you produce matters.<sup>3</sup> The city has always been a character unto itself in local music scenes. Sleater-Kinney’s Carrie Brownstein, writing in her memoir *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl*, notes that “to be a fan of music [is also] to be a fan of cities, of places” (2015, 79). The self-conscious “place-ness” (Stahl 2004, 55) of genres such as punk, grunge, and indie use spatial discourse to bolster their own authority and the realness of the music emerging from particular places. Fans and tastemakers from within local scenes are often aware of scenes’ significance as they’re unfolding. According to Giulia Pines, a participant in the New York City indie rock scene who — unlike Lewitinn and Neustadter — never took up DJing or managing bands in addition to her blog:

We knew that we were in the middle of something special, and that it was a privilege to be in New York City in this weird kind of liminal space between 9/11 and when the city became an unaffordable billionaire’s playground like it is now. We knew it wasn’t going to last. And it didn’t. So it needed to be documented.

The New York scene exerted a magnetic pull on indie rock acts from around the world, to the point where non-NYC bands’ original origins are forgotten because they ‘came up’ alongside city favourites like the Yeah Yeah Yeahs and the Moldy Peaches. The White Stripes arrived in New York and brought along with them a grungier style of garage rock from their hometown of Detroit. Franz Ferdinand, from Glasgow, crossed the Atlantic and were playing Central Park and

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<sup>3</sup> There is a strong tradition of place studies in recent feminist and queer scholarship in particular (see Gieseking 2020; Tongson 2011).

New York dive bars by 2004; Arcade Fire made a similar pilgrimage from Montreal. Even the Killers have had a hard time shaking their association with the New York scene; following their arrival from Las Vegas, they walked onstage to find the venue surprisingly crowded for a city where they had never played and a band that hadn't yet signed a record deal — it turns out Lewitinn had told everyone she knew to come to the show, despite being told to keep their arrival quiet to avoid a label bidding war. According to Lewitinn:

New York became the epicenter of music. Like that, I was fully aware of. Because every magazine was talking about it. Every newspaper was talking about it. So I'm like, okay, yeah, it is. Not realizing that I was probably like in the fucking eye of the tornado, *causing* the tornado, you know? We knew that New York was the epicenter because everyone told us that it was. But beyond that, it's just like that was the reality we had, you know?

The 'place-ness' of New York City in the 2000s was perhaps most evident to those outside of the storm, as Lewitinn observes here, and the draw of New York for outside bands eager to identify with a cohesive scene is testament to its creative power. There is a long tradition of alternative musics grounding themselves in place, an ethos that frequently manifests as what Geoff Stahl identifies as "civic boosterism" (2004, 56) — a kind of moral economy that emerges around artists' identification with and support of the city or locality in which they find themselves. The concept of scenes also performs the vital function of providing a container for the unwieldy sprawl of music cultures; much in the same way that genre functions as a superficial taxonomy, the idea of a 'scene' can help outsiders delineate and categorize particular subcultural practices.

Entangled as they are with physical spaces and places, music scenes still need to account for the intangible structures that often shape local scenes. Charles Landry, in his writing on creativity in urban spaces, defines a creative milieu as a place that contains the necessary 'hard' and 'soft' infrastructure to generate a flow of ideas and innovation. Hard infrastructure, according to Landry, includes things such as educational institutions, cultural facilities (or

venues), and support services such as transit and social services like health care (2008, 133). Soft infrastructure, meanwhile, is the “associative structures and social networks, connections, human interactions that encourage the flow of ideas between individuals and institutions” (2008, 133). Technology straddles this line between the hard and soft, “enabl[ing] wider networks of communication to develop” and helping facilitate these softer connections and creative community-building practices (2008, 133). These kinds of soft connections were imperative to how the New York scene operated; according to Lewitinn, one thing often led to another. “It was like, ‘Well I’m going to be at this party anyway, so I might as well DJ. And if I’m going to be DJing, I might as well promote. And if I’m going to promote it, well you know my friend’s band is really good and they’re looking for a gig.’” If creative milieus hinge upon this kind of network capacity, then it makes sense that the advent of the internet completely redefined the ways and redrew the boundaries within which music scenes could operate, how people found themselves and each other within these spaces. Music remained entangled with specific places, but for the first time there was a tension between pre-internet norms and new possibilities. As Brownstein reflects: “The notion of ‘somewhere’ predated the internet’s seeming intervention of ‘everywhere’” (2015, 79-80). The notion of a scene is already highly amenable to the porousness that technology offers; as Stahl notes, scenes are associated with “flux and flow... at the juncture of spatial relations and spatial praxis” (2004, 53).

Scene studies is already full of language and metaphor that seem to account for technology and virtual connections, even predating the rise of the internet. Holly Kruse’s (1993) research on identity in alternative music cultures explores how her participants negotiate interpersonal connections beyond locality, adapting “from a particular space to a nonparticular space” (1993, 38). Róza Emília Barna (2011, 236) has written that ‘network’ might be a more

useful term for the constellation of connections experienced by people living and working in close proximity to music:

The network is better suited to analysing the dynamic nature of music making and music-related social groups than other popular concepts, including subculture, taste culture, milieu culture, neo-tribe, or style community. [...] The network, moreover, enables us to focus simultaneously on localities as well as translocal connections — places as well as routes. For this reason, it is particularly suitable for the description of society and creative activity in the age of Internet [sic] technology and global economic, political, social, and cultural interconnectedness.

Reframing scenes as networks, writes Barna, enables the exploration of their disparities and tensions alongside more cohesive elements. Virtual scenes offer new challenges to how we conceive of scenes' temporality, sustainability, and accessibility (Drysdale 2015; Lee and Peterson 2004). However, as Barna (2011, 24) notes, no scene is wholly virtual; online music spaces are always embedded in a broader set of social relationships and take advantage of technological affordances that are part of longer histories.

### ***2000s Tech and Playlists***

Studies of music and the internet have tended to focus on how community, and in particular the enactment of music fandom, can be understood in the online context (Barna 2011, 30). Instead of focusing solely on community-building here, I want to reach for a 'thicker' description of the material and technological shifts that were at the heart of the early 2000s 'bleed' of music scenes into online space, and the ways that women, girls, and girl culture were paramount to this expansion. Women have always been present at the nexus of technology and music. The Shyvers multiphone, released in 1939 by Seattle inventor Kenneth C. Shyvers, was an early coin-operated jukebox that allowed patrons at restaurants, cafes, and bars to play music through existing telephone lines (Dead Media Archive). At the height of the product's popularity, over 8000 multiphones were used in establishments along the west coast of the United States; the phone lines were staffed by all-female teams of disc jockeys (DJs) who would

quickly locate and play listeners' selections from a centralized music library (Dead Media Archive). A similar, slightly less widespread system also existed on the east coast. The Telephone Music Service began operating out of Pittsburgh in 1929 and similarly employed only female disc jockeys until the lines closed for good in 1997 (Higgins 2020). According to communications scholar Zack Furness (2019), women's labour was unquestionably the driving force of the Telephone Music Service. "Much of the grunt work was hidden from the public and done by women who were only known to callers by their first names," notes Furness (2019). "A practice meant to protect their anonymity [...] and to also create a bit of a fantasy for their callers." The agency of these early DJs is notably limited by the affordances of these telephone jukebox services — as many have observed, both the multiphone and early twentieth century telephone music services effectively serve as the earliest examples of on-demand music streaming — but women were nonetheless at the forefront of these early examples of recorded music as a social practice.

Women were folded into early music technologies because of their cheap labour, as with telephone music services, but they also became implicated by virtue of their associations with domestic and social spaces. Well over a decade before indie music cultures seized upon cassettes as "a metonym for [indie] subculture's self-image of radical accessibility, community, and independence," tapes were advertised as a domestic technology (Drew 2019, 141). In a November 1971 article in *The American Home*, readers were encouraged to liven up their holiday parties with "personalized party music on tape" (Reice). "Program a 'party sound track' ahead of time with a tape recorder," the author writes cheerfully. "It's easy and inexpensive fun [...] What's more, tape is so fantastically flexible, you can keep bringing your soundtrack up to date" (ibid). Similar endorsements of party tapes as cutting-edge hostess aides appear in

*Glamour* later that same decade; the magazine's December 1979 issue outlined the mechanics of making such a tape, and a similar article from December 1983 noted that "music is an important ingredient of a great party, and cassette tapes make it easier to provide non-stop music" (Begole 1979; 1983). The latter article goes so far as to provide readers with a sample playlist of some of the "Best Tunes of '83" to get aspiring tape-makers started, including singles from Donna Summer, Billy Joel, and David Bowie. Mentions of cassette tapes in women's magazines was a sustained trend by the close of the 1970s; between 1979 and 1983, *Glamour* ran over a dozen articles on everything from "Adding Music to Your Bedroom and Other Good Places" to "How You — Yes You — Can Fix Your Stereo." The inclusion of this kind of content in women's magazines of the 1970s and early '80s is an indication of how women's roles in curating domestic and social spaces placed them in relationship to early at-home recording technologies, and also speaks to a growing awareness of the interrelationship between music and its growing centrality to collective and individual memory-making (see van Dijck 2006).

The power of newly accessible recording technologies and more portable music players has always been connected to this idea of dissolving boundaries between spaces and building community. The widespread concerns around at-home taping as a growing phenomenon led to a series of consumer surveys issued in the early 1980s to find out more about home tapers' habits.<sup>4</sup> These studies showed that a large number of people owned portable decks and named "space shifting" — making a copy for the car or other, non-home spaces — as one of their main motives for taping (Warner 1982, 17; Yankelovich et al. 1982, 80). Around the same time, burgeoning indie scenes in the UK and US were using cassettes as both "instrument[s] of diffusion and as token[s] of intimacy and community, values essential to indie's self-image" (Drew 2019, 138).

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed breakdown of the 1980s' home tapings hearings, see Drew 2014.

The humble cassette's role in the "cultural assemblage of technology and mythology" around indie culture cannot be overstated; its refusal to identify as either a "backstage" or "frontstage" object — used for both personal and quasi-professional purposes, to share demos but also shore up relationships and mentorship networks — lined up seemingly perfectly with an indie ethos of localism and understated careerism (ibid, 148-150). This same ethos would play out decades later, as the rise of MP3 blogs saw indie enthusiasts grappling with these same associations with piracy swirling around the newest mode of sharing music quickly, cheaply, and with fewer alleged barriers than ever before.<sup>5</sup> The power of emergent modes of music distribution has always laid in their ability to dissolve the boundaries between spaces and ground the listener in a personalized soundscape. The jump from mixtapes to playlists was one primarily facilitated by the development of new technologies like the MP3 player and user-friendly music libraries designed for everyday consumers, but the impulse to soundtrack one's life, as the above case studies demonstrate, is one that has always existed.<sup>6</sup>

With the ubiquity of streaming services and smartphone functionality today, it's easy to forget that the ability to make a playlist 'on the go' is still a relatively new phenomenon. Making playlists 'on the go' was initially an iPod-specific function; the iPod was the first device to allow users to make playlists on their iPod from songs already present on the device, as opposed to other MP3 players where users could only make playlists on a computer and then upload them to the device (Avdeeff 2011, 224). This functionality, along with its small size and streamlined

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<sup>5</sup> Like the discursive space between the feminized party tapes and cassettes' celebrated role in the distribution of low-profile indie and new wave music, however, the gap between MP3 blogs and MP3 cultures' more social uses is notably gendered. For a more in-depth exploration of gendered expertise and MP3 blogs, see Chapter 4.

<sup>6</sup> Another difference between mixtape and playlist cultures, related to this project's exploration of indie's significance, is the emerging ability to catalogue and build playlists using more niche libraries of music. Whereas the housewives encouraged to make party tapes by 1970s *Glamour* were limited by what they could tape off the radio, the rise of Napster in 1999 and other affordances of the early internet meant that music enthusiasts in the new millennium frequently listened and 'used' music from further afield.



design, made the iPod the new standard for MP3 devices in the early 2000s. The second-generation iPod, released in April 2003, could be used with PC computers in addition to already compatible Macintoshes. In October of the same year, Apple released iTunes and iTunes music stores for Windows, effectively securing iPod's market among young music lovers as the foremost MP3 player (Avdeeff 2011, 216). For the first time, everyday consumers and music fans were able to make playlists completely independently of a computer — able to build a soundtrack at a moment's notice.

Cultural anxieties around social isolation that had swirled around Walkmans and other portable cassette players also attached themselves to the iPod. As Melissa Avdeeff explores in her mapping of the field, most literature on MP3 cultures works to illuminate *how* these devices were used, with far less attention paid to their social potential and cultural impacts. According to Avdeeff, much of the mainstream press at the time of the iPod's 2001 release focused on the MP3 player as a socially isolating technology, “a device that allowed you to listen to music in private, while in a public setting” (Avdeeff 2011, 2). Rarely considered are the ways in which iPod cultures made porous the boundaries of certain public settings and scenes — and specifically, those areas of the scene that relied on fans and music workers amassing a hefty collection of music in clunky (and expensive) physical forms such as vinyl, cassettes, and CDs. As Will Straw notes in his work on the gendered gatekeeping practices inherent to record collecting, “male practices of accumulation take shape in an ongoing relationship between the personal space of the collection and public, discursive systems of ordering or value” (Straw 1997, 6).<sup>7</sup> In other words, masculinist music cultures draw and redraw their boundaries via the

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<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that the gendered dimensions of these practices — and, indeed, the categories of public/private and mainstream/fringe themselves — are certainly more nuanced than Straw's arguments lay out here. For more on resisting the construction of mainstream and subcultural spaces as distinct entities, see Chapter 1.

reproduction of materialist music cultures and — in turn — a singular mode of collecting music and amassing the necessary cultural capital to be an ‘expert’ or ‘real fan’ emerges.

The very first television commercial for the iPod reflects, perhaps strategically, this connection between Straw’s “masculine practices of accumulation” and nascent MP3 culture. The 60-second spot features a roughly 30-year-old man bobbing his head enthusiastically as he loads songs from iTunes onto his brand new iPod. A stack of CDs towers to one side of his desk and — once he unplugs the device from his Mac, inserts the earbuds, and starts to dance down the narrow hallway of the apartment — we also notice an artfully placed crate under the desk, overflowing with vinyl records and books. The advertisement is strikingly different from the aesthetics that would come to define iPod commercials in subsequent years: colourful backgrounds with dark silhouettes wearing white iPod earbuds, almost always dancing and moving their anonymized bodies to upbeat and catchy licensed tracks. It is striking how quickly Apple moved away from using particular bodies in particular environments to advertise its product; as one retrospective observes, “it was easy to identify with these silhouettes because they essentially represented ‘the masses’ — they were no one group, one type of person, or one ‘look’” (Filipowicz 2020). It’s unclear whether the anomaly of the initial commercial, featuring a masculine vinyl-lover in khakis, was a failed precursor to the more easily identifiable branding to come or a purposeful smoothing over of music collector aesthetics and sensibilities — a kind of gradual introduction to a technology that opens up music collection and curation practices to a much wider audience than homosocial vinyl cultures had ever really allowed. The trajectory of iPod commercials offers a microcosm of the ways in which the device’s affordances of MP3 management and the ‘playlistification’ of music replaced the pre-internet materiality of music collections with something, if not egalitarian, then at least offering more potential.

### *DJ and Tastemaker Cultures*

One of the areas of music culture that experienced the most visible shift as a result of newly digital modes of music collecting was that of DJing. DJ culture, like vinyl culture more generally, was historically based around gendered gatekeeping practices that reproduced “a cultural environment shaped by male technophilia” (Bloustein 2016, 232). The connection between DJ cultures and record collecting writ large is made even more explicit in Straw’s 1997 article. “If the worlds of club disc jockeys [...] seem characterized by shared knowledges which exclude the would-be entrant,” writes Straw, “This functions not only to preserve the homosocial character of such worlds, but to block women from the social and economic advancement which they may offer” (1997, 10). Farrugia (2012) outlines the aspects of cultural production that constitute the act of DJing as existing in four categories: amassing a music collection; the physical act of DJing itself; promoting, networking, and other business aspects of maintaining a DJ career or hobby; and the act of producing original music, remixes, or edits. When one considers the gatekeeping and barriers to access around record shops, purchasing vinyl, and other hallmarks of pre-internet music collecting, one can begin to appreciate the entanglement of DJ culture and music collecting.

Feminist scholars have noted a significant increase in the number of female DJs in North America and Europe since the turn of the new millennium (Bloustein 2016; Farrugia 2012; Gadir 2016; Gavanoas and Reitsamer 2013). As Maren Hancock outlines in her survey of the field, the simultaneous uptick of female DJs and scholarship on female DJs can be credited to advances in technology that increase access to DJ culture, certainly, but also serves to highlight and

popularize a more diverse DJ culture than existed in a pre-internet age (2020, 6).<sup>8</sup> In other words, the visibility of a more diverse DJ culture begets more diverse DJs. This is in stark contrast to many prominent historians of DJ culture who claim that female DJs were historically absent. One particularly egregious example of this is the work of Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton, authors of the influential monograph *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life* (1999, 2006, 2014), widely considered to be the defining history of North American DJ culture. In all three editions of *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*, Brewster and Broughton claim that women had virtually nothing to do with the development of DJing and DJ culture. The authors limit their discussion of female DJs to two pages out of 400 in the first two editions (1999, 2006) and, despite increasing their coverage of female DJs to a whole four pages in the third edition, they continue to state explicitly that women were categorically absent from DJ culture from its origins until this ‘turn’ in the early 2000s. According to Brewster and Broughton, “Throughout this book, the DJ is a ‘he’ and this is not just a matter of grammatical simplicity. In DJing [...] women have been largely frozen out of the picture, with precious few exceptions” (2014, 463).<sup>9</sup>

In actuality, female, queer, and racialized DJs have been key components of DJ culture since its advent.<sup>10</sup> Halloween Martin, host of Chicago-based radio show “The Musical Clock” beginning in 1930, was one of the first radio hosts to base her show on presenting music from records instead of a live band (Fikentscher 2013). Independent radio shows like Martin’s played

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<sup>8</sup> Although, as Hancock also notes, the increased visibility of female DJs has also created a backlash within DJ culture wherein female DJs are framed as either gimmicks, tokens, or are further essentialized, potentially reinforcing gendered binaries (2020, 11).

<sup>9</sup> In *The Record Players: DJ Revolutionaries* (2010), a collection of interviews with forty-six men these same authors deem the most important DJs in history, Brewster and Broughton similarly declare: “There are no women here. That’s not our fault, that’s how history has dealt it so far” (5).

<sup>10</sup> While my focus here is on female DJs, the vibrant history of queer DJ culture that effectively saw disco, dance, and house musics explode onto urban scenes through the 1970s and ‘80s are explored at length in both Luis Garcia’s “An Alternate History of Sexuality in Club Culture” (2014), as well as Sasha Geffen’s *Glitter Up the Dark: How Pop Broke the Binary* (2020).

a key role in defining the parameters of DJ and music programming. Over time, however, popular female hosts left these positions as the salaries and stature associated with radio DJing increased (Farrugia 2012, Halper 2001). Mainstream histories of DJ culture similarly leave out Daphne Oram, who founded the BBC Radiophonic Workshop in 1958; Judy Weinstein, a close friend and mentor of several major New York City DJs during the 1970s; and DJ Paulette, a leading figure in the 1990s dance scene (Hutton 2004, Williams 2017, Tantum 2016, Howell 2018). Accounts such as Brewster and Broughton's situate female DJs opposite 'real' (male) DJs, minor footnotes in a 400-page history rather than embedded in the fabric of that history from the start. With this in mind, I want to acknowledge that my discussion of female DJs and the porousness offered by new technologies in music scenes during the 2000s is part of a much longer lineage of women's involvement in music spaces and music work, even as that involvement has been derided or minimized (see, for instance, Vilanova and Cassidy 2019).

Far from being a gimmick enabled by the erasure of barriers to DJ spaces and scenes, 2000s 'play DJs' developed out of a lineage of prolific, savvy, and enterprising women embedded in the music industries. "I wasn't the best writer, but I thought I was a pretty good DJ," notes Neustadter (in Campbell 2019). "I was a good curator of music." Like so many others, Neustadter's offline involvement in the scene kicked off when her love of music led to her being in contact with the right friends at the right time:

All the things that I'm good at and that I love sort of merged into this one thing. I met this guy Jasper Coolidge [...] he was taking photos mostly of bands. And he started booking bands and approached me, and he said — now, at the time, every single booking person, except for this one woman Megan who was working at the Mercury Lounge, was a guy. But he approached me and said, "Do you want to partner up with me and book bands?" And he would just sort of give me a night and I would help him book bands and promote the nights. That's how it started. I don't think I would have, on my own, [approached] a venue. [...] I feel now, looking back, that without Jasper, I don't know how seriously I would have been taken. Jasper was like this short Filipino guy, and [he was] smart, because he saw in me the reach I had. Again, it's so sexist to think that way, but I can see

how that works, you know? You're at a show and you're this cute girl and you talk to people and say, "Hey, I have a night. Come see these bands."

Neustadter's visibility as a well-known blogger meshed, in this instance, with her visibility as a young woman in an exceptionally white, exceptionally male dominated scene, positioning her as part of a much longer history of young, female music workers whose perceived contributions to the scene were assumed to be primarily aesthetic.<sup>11</sup> The bloggers' 'slip' into offline music work also represents, however, a second gendered issue in such spaces: the casualization and subsequent undervaluing of feminized creative labour. Bloggers frequently categorized their forays into DJing, managing bands, and booking showcases as extraneous to their real work or careers, in keeping with what scholars have identified as one major drawback of this kind of non-defined, creative work. Creative labour challenges the distinction between production and consumption, signalled by terms like 'produsage,' 'prosumption,' 'playbour,' and 'co-creation' (Conor et al. 2015, 4). Female creative workers in particular, notes Stephanie Taylor and Karen Littleton (2012), are often resistant to categorizing their creative labour as such. The ephemeral nature of the early internet and the enmeshment of bloggers' offline creative labour with these online worlds, I argue, similarly contributes to murky language around this work. "[We] were just sort of thinking of it as something fun to do and sort of a hobby, as opposed to something you could actually make money off of or be taken seriously for doing," notes Young (in Campbell 2019). This shared framing of their offline music work as an extension of their blogs, notes Lewitinn, also contributed to the sense of community in the scene:

You just did your best to make sure you didn't have nights that overlapped. Like, "Oh, that's so-and-so's night, so don't do a party then." [...] There was no space for

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<sup>11</sup> Much as the all-female DJ teams at mid-century telephone music services were employed to create "a bit of a fantasy for their callers," (Furness 2019), the famous American Whisky A Go Go employed women who acted as both DJs and dancers (see Thornton 1995, 100). These 'dance DJs' changed records and performed dance routines in glass cages suspended above the crowd, laying further groundwork for the derision of girl DJs' technical skills in favour of their appearance and social capital that would structure Neustadter's experience of the gig nearly half a century later.

competition. We weren't making money, you know? We weren't making money on our blogs, we weren't making money at our club nights. We weren't doing anything except having a good time and trying to get exposure for bands that we liked and things that we enjoyed. And then like, you know, it would be cool if we got a drink sponsored by accident or whatever. Or if there was an open bar — that's even better.

As evidenced here, the slippage between bloggers' online and offline involvement in the scene was largely synonymous with the fluidity of the communities and friendships that ebbed and flowed through these same spaces.

### *Intimacies and Auras*

The reciprocal relationship between music and community is a key feature of many scenes, particularly those built on the DIY ethos typical of punk and indie music. David Verbuč (2017b) argues that the lack of backstage area in most DIY venues helps produce a sense of intimacy between artists, audiences, and venue organizers that serves as a crucial foundation for DIY scenes and creative production. This general feeling of “intimate publicness,” he writes, is compounded by the close relationships in these scenes borne of logistical necessity, as artists and organizers relate to one another via a “network of favors” — everything from crashing at one another's houses on tour to playing in small and non-commercial venues on the recommendation of a friend (2017a, 21).<sup>12</sup> In Verbuč's work on punk houses, he notes the long history of punk communities forming in liminal spaces such as private homes, beyond institutional — and often legal — bounds (Verbuč 2017a, 2017b; see also Lyle 2008). While indie shares many of these same impulses to shirk institutional space, there was an additional imperative in 2000s New York to developing these close networks and organize music via more informal channels during the 2000s: the city's cabaret laws. New York City Cabaret Law was a dancing ban originally

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<sup>12</sup> Just months prior to the release of their debut album *Hot Fuss* (Island 2004), and in the midst of rising hype as they continued to play support slots for New York's stellastarr\* on their US tour, the Killers turned down a gig to play Sarah Lewitinn's prom-themed birthday party (Miller 2021, Bartolomeu 2021).

enacted in 1926, during Prohibition, and not formally repealed until 2017. Although enforcement of the law was arbitrary for much of the latter 20th century, New York mayor Rudy Giuliani resurrected the dormant rule and it was used to fine and shut down many bars and venues during the late 90s and early 2000s.<sup>13</sup> According to one club organizer, the cabaret law “forced good things further underground,” as social dancing remained illegal at all but around 100 establishments across the city that had filed and complied with the nebulous cabaret license legislation (South, in Beta 2013; Sutherland-Namako 2018). These limits meant that organizing dance nights and concerts that encouraged or allowed dancing — although they undoubtedly still happened — were perhaps more susceptible to existing in the types of liminal spaces and via the kind of intimacies that Verbuč explores in his descriptions of punk house shows.

This form of “intimate publicness” is different to the types of “digital intimate publics” fostered by online influencers. Recent scholarship on online influencer cultures largely figures these communities and the relationships within them as marked by a kind of self-conscious performance based in a growing awareness that one’s personal image, consumer choices, and even politics is akin to a brand, able to be leveraged and traded on in a particular kind of postfeminist landscape (see Duffy 2015; Arriagada et al. 2020; Hearn and Banet-Weiser 2020; Chen and Kanai 2021). In the internet’s nascency, online space had not yet acquired this kind of standalone importance, and was thus closer to a digital extension of physical space, with uncertain audiences and unclear stakes. To return to Verbuč’s discussion of the spatial politics of DIY show spaces, then, the online-offline shift of the 2000s effectively worked to dissolve the bounds of any kind of ‘backstage’ to urban music scenes like those of New York and cast their subjects, not as brands to aspire to or celebrities to be revered, but links in a music scene who

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<sup>13</sup> The ban is also referenced in the Le Tigre song “My My Metrocard,” which calls out Giuliani by name and uses call-and-response vocals to condemn the then-mayor’s enforcement of the cabaret laws (Mr. Lady 1999).



were simply “living their lives in public” (Verbuč 2017b, 285). Virtual space, as many internet scholars have noted, is already somewhat predisposed to fostering these types of digital intimacies (Bortree 2005), and this might be heightened by the ‘liveness’ of the blog posts — appearing, as they did regularly, in the aftermath of a show or other events grounded in the offline space. According to Pines:

That was what was so great about it. Like, the sort of instant nostalgia aspect of like, “I’m going to go home and I’m going to write about this, and then I’m going to go to Laura’s blog, and then I’m going to Audrey’s blog.” Like, I will get this show from five different perspectives after I’ve seen it and written about it myself.

In this way, early music blogs not only existed as entry points into local scenes for fans who were unable to be physically present in them, but they also served as a mirror, reflecting and refracting particular nights and performances through a multitude of perspectives for scene participants’ (re)consumption.

This blurring of on- and offline scene activity raises new questions about the ephemerality of the live show, even as similar anxieties swirled around the arrival of MP3 technologies and the authenticity of the recorded musical object itself. As Sarah Thornton outlines in her study of British live music cultures, *Club Cultures*, the second half of the twentieth century was largely marked by a gradual shift away from locating authenticity in music’s “liveness,” reflected in the recording and listening conventions of the era (1995, 50). By the 1980s, Thornton writes, the tables had turned and — with the arrival of the discotheque — it was suddenly “live” venues that must announce their difference (1995, 53). This ontological shift also contributes, writes Thornton (1995, 51-55), to the growing romanticization of both vinyl records and DJs at this time:

Recording technologies did not, therefore, corrode or demystify “aura” as much as disperse and relocate it. Degrees of aura came to be attributed to new, exclusive, and rare records. [...] The record is an authentic source and the crowd makes it a “living” creature. DJs bridge the gap in that they are professional collectors and players of “originals” as well as

mediators and orchestrators of the crowd, but not to the extent that they seem to embody authenticity — like live music performers.

In other words, the musical object becomes the source of authenticity and the further one is removed from materiality, the less authentic one becomes. The space between a musician attempting to approximate a recording and a DJ spinning a record of the same song might be far, but surely a DJ using a pre-made playlist of MP3s is somehow even less grounded in the “real.” Simon Reynolds has argued that the materiality of the musical object “fades” and becomes a “folk memory” when MP3 is used to reproduce musical sound (2011, 125). However, as punk scholar Pete Dale points out, a certain degree of ephemerality is inherent to any sort of musical object, digital or otherwise: “Neither a vinyl record nor a CD or an MP3 player, despite themselves being graspable, can make music itself into a graspable object” (2018, 31). A blog or a playlist may appear less authentic and more distanced from “liveness,” at first impulse, than other ways of approaching DJing and scene-making, but as studies like Thornton’s show, these conceptions of “liveness” are always already shaped by socio-historical notions of what gets to ‘count’ as authentic and important.

### ***Conclusions***

In what Barna identifies as “techno-optimist” narratives, the arrival of the internet promised musical diversification, democratization, and industry deconcentration (2018, 258). Instead, its arrival has mostly been marked by a gradual muddying of boundaries between on- and offline scenes, along with the proliferation of cultural intermediaries who exist in this newly liminal space. Curators and “taste entrepreneurs” (Barna 2018) like the multihyphenate female music workers discussed here represent a new group of music professionals carving out positions in the expanding spaces between producers and consumers, leveraging digital literacy into symbolic and subcultural capital as they moved between and across the digital and ‘real’ space.

Much like Rob Drew identifies the cassettes that played such a central role in 1980s indie music cultures as neither “frontstage” nor “backstage” objects (Drew 2019, 150), the blogs, MP3 players, digital files, and playlists of the mid-2000s take on a similarly multifunctional role of inviting outsiders into local music scenes while also facilitating offline intimacies via digital connections. Understood in this way, Lewitinn’s metaphors of floods and tornadoes make infinite sense; the internet — and New York City indie rock — upset convention and redefined how the boundaries of scenes were drawn and redrawn as notions of a cultural backstage continued to shrink in the face of the tide of intimate publicness.

Nothing was ever quite the same after the storm.

## Hidden Tracks

### OUTRO

[...] I am here tonight in front of these speakers *with magic soaking my spine* and I am ready to be handed something holy as a guitar solo ripped from the hands of every boy called a prodigy.

— “The Night Boygenius Covers the Killers,” Kenley Allgood

When Lucy Dacus, Phoebe Bridgers, and Julien Baker came together to form indie rock supergroup boygenius, they knew exactly what they were doing. The trio spent four days together in the summer of 2018 laying down the tracks that would become their self-titled six-song EP, making the conscious decision to eschew their usual teams of collaborators and producers in favour of an all-female band and support crew. “On one level I want it to be unremarkable,” noted Baker (Coscarelli 2018). “I want it to be unremarkable that three women — six with bass and drums and violin — played on this. But it’s a thing.” The ‘thing’ that Baker is referring to is the same driving force behind boygenius’ name, supporting tour, and entire ethos. According to Dacus, the idea for the supergroup came out of a conversation where the three contemporaries were discussing the idea of the default masculinity of indie rock artistry and “what type of creative work comes out of that upbringing” (Coscarelli 2018). The resulting album is full of masterful songwriting and seamless harmonies, but the album — and the band — are most remarkable for the self-awareness it demonstrates as part of a lineage of indie that has historically made very little space for artists and audiences like those that would flock to see boygenius that fall. I still remember sharing the *New York Times* article marking the band’s formation and feeling like something was about to click into place. “Super cool that Phoebe Bridgers and her pals turned my dissertation into an EP and a band and a tour before I could even write it,” I wrote jokingly. I would sit on the very edge of my seat that November at my favourite Toronto music venue, as if I could physically climb inside the words that Dacus, Bridgers, and

Baker sang — performing first as three solo sets, then together as they played the boygenius EP in full. But it wasn't until almost three weeks after that moment, when a video appeared on YouTube from the tour's final show at Los Angeles' Wiltern Theatre of the trio covering the Killers, that I finally grasped at the enormity of what was happening: indie rock histories are full of echoes, and I'd just had front row — well, balcony — seats to yet another ripple.

As far as cultural reckonings go, Phoebe Bridgers never had much of a choice when it came to her position at the centre of conversations around indie rock past and present. Supported in her early career by Ryan Adams, a mainstay of 2000s indie rock and thoroughly embedded in the same New York City scene that saw the rise of bands like the Strokes and Interpol, Bridgers was one of several women who came forward in early 2019 with allegations against Adams. According to Bridgers' testimony, professional correspondence and collaboration with Adams turned into a romantic relationship that quickly became emotionally abusive (Coscarelli and Ryzik 2018). When she broke up with him, he rescinded his offers of professional support; in spite of this, most of the media covering Bridgers' debut album in 2017 gave Adams credit for her meteoric rise (see Kaplan 2017; Valish 2017; Varga 2018). Much has been written since this tipping point on the legacies of abuse and power in the music industry and, for perhaps the first time, we are finally acknowledging the contributions to music and culture that have been silenced because of a million stories like this one that never made it into the pages of *The New York Times*.<sup>1</sup> As culture writer Annie Leszkiewicz (2018) has pointed out, it is almost exclusively women who do “the boring work of killing our idols” while male artists continue to profit from a music industry that has absolutely nothing to gain from shifting its masculinist bent.

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<sup>1</sup> See MacDonald 2019 and Snapes 2019. I added my own voice to the mix later that spring, when I published a piece with *A.Side* reflecting on my own investment in Bridgers' narrative as someone who was only introduced to her music because of my own emotionally abusive relationship (Bimm 2019).

It's a tired narrative, but it is nothing compared to the exhaustion of the women and other marginalized genders — the fans, the artists, and other music workers alike — who continue to exist and struggle and commiserate in its midst.

This dissertation emerged out of a deep-seated need to tell a different story. I had already done so much grappling with my own complicated feelings about indie as a genre, an industry, and as the thing that trained me how to consume media as a teen — I wanted to see what I could find if I looked instead for those feelings of joy and connection that draws us to music in the first place. I intentionally proposed the chapters that make up this dissertation on cultural sites that exist *around* 2000s indie rock, rather than the music itself, because I was convinced that is where I'd find those answers. If the 2000s existed as a kind of linchpin in the cultural mainstreaming of indie rock and a vibrant, messy liminal space in between previously analogue forms of music distribution and the rise of an increasingly online culture, I wanted to seek out the voices of those interlocutors who were pivotal to those shifts. Jessica Hopper, in her essay “Emo: Where the Girls Aren't,” noted that the girls in 2000s music cultures are frequently anonymous. “Girls in emo songs today don't have names,” Hopper wrote in 2003. “Women are not identified beyond their absence, their shape is drawn by the pain they've caused. Their lives, their day-to-day does not exist, women do not get colored in.” I understood girls as pivotal to 2000s indie rock because practically every woman I know has feelings about at least one Alexandra Patsavas soundtrack, had an iPod full of song recommendations they found on blogs, and still remembers all the words to “Maps.” As Hopper suggests, I just had to fill in the shapes.

### ***Research Objectives***

The chapters that make up this dissertation project focus on a range of cultural sites that supported the unprecedented mainstreaming of 2000s indie rock. Each site is marked by a

particular kind of music worker who inhabits the space, and I make a case for the agency and cultural influence that these intermediaries hold regardless of their visibility or legibility to the so-called mainstream. Female bedroom musicians exist in a long lineage of gendered bedroom cultures, facing and articulating their struggle with many of the same themes of isolation and precarity that masculinized discourses of small-scale indie musicianship have yet to grapple with. Music supervision as a field has been feminized and derided for its ‘below-the-line’ status, and yet this was the site of seemingly endless innovation and influence during a defining era of television. Film projects headed up by female writers and directors became a space to reflect on some of the more troubling aspects of indie rock cultures with a wry feminist camp sensibility. Enterprising bloggers existed as ‘women on the ground’ in the midst of bustling urban indie scenes, part of a longer lineage of challenges to the rock critic industrial complex. And finally, the advent of technologies like the MP3 unseated the subcultural capital of live music scenes while young, female DJs reinterpreted indie as a social practice founded on interconnectedness. What draws these disparate conversations together are the same questions that anchor many conversations about indie rock: namely, what are the cultural channels that confer legitimacy and ‘cool’ upon certain styles, genres, and aesthetics over others? What happens when cultural intermediaries who have faced barriers to shaping music scenes and their attendant discourses gain access to those spaces? And how are these intermediaries and tastemakers — and their impact — alternatively historicized or invisibilized within the broader cultural consciousness?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the answer to all of these questions is firmly rooted in an aversion to feminized cultural texts, practices, and archives. A remarkably consistent through line in all five chapters is the resilience of indie rock — and music cultures more broadly — to being challenged and accepting the inevitably gendered dimensions of its cultural

mainstreaming. We have seen this play out in the twenty-year interim in the ways that we as a society perform nostalgia for 2000s girl culture texts with particularly strong ties to indie rock. In a conference paper I presented at PopCon in autumn 2020 titled “Bella Swan Listens to Muse,” I grappled with how pop culture history treats the *Twilight* film saga soundtracks — arguably one of Alexandra Patsavas’ more formidable contributions to the 2000s soundtrack landscape. In an almost imperceptible cultural shift, I noted, texts like *Twilight* and even *The O.C.* are now allowed a certain degree of recuperability on the basis of nostalgia and having ‘good music.’<sup>2</sup> This selective mode of remembering 2000s soundtracks — namely, as separate from the film and television franchises they were attached to — is consistent with indie rock’s aversion to citational practice.<sup>3</sup> If we understand 2000s indie music as a genre defined by its proximity to a particular kind of culturally literate, white, middle class, straight masculinity, it becomes possible to posit the deliberate curation of, for instance, the *Twilight* saga’s indie-heavy soundtracks (and their subsequent cultural reclamation) as a strategic distancing from the feminized, faddish, or what Susan Cook (2001) terms the “abject popular” cultural texts that marked this era. Rather than read the *Twilight* soundtracks as an attempt to elevate or add cultural value to the ‘lowbrow’ genre of feminized media franchises, I argue instead that the gulf between the two is exacerbated in how we perform nostalgia for these soundtracks.<sup>4</sup> Performing nostalgia for one canon (2000s indie rock) without acknowledging its embeddedness in another (2000s girl culture) perpetuates a longer historical trajectory of subculture studies and rock histories that forgoes systemic-level

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<sup>2</sup> In a mid-2019 interview with *USA Today*, actor Robert Pattinson called the soundtracks “quite ahead of their time” and even remarked that they’ve become “quite the hip thing to like” (Ryan 2019).

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 1 for further discussion of indie rock’s citational politics.

<sup>4</sup> *Twilight* on the whole is a media franchise rich with opportunities for cultural analysis of girls’ fandom, gatekeeping, and what Jonathan Gray (2003) has called “anti-fandom.” For more on how this anti-fandom intersects with gender and girlhood, see Avdeeff 2016 and Driscoll 2012.



analysis, too deeply invested in reproducing narratives of autonomy, male genius, and the neoliberal individualized cultural subject.

In a 2018 *UPROXX* article titled “The ‘Twilight’ Movies Introduced a Generation of Girls to Indie Music,” writer Chloe Gilke notes that “the first time [she] heard a Radiohead song was at a midnight premiere for a movie about teenage vampires.” For Gilke, the indie music included in the *Twilight* films represented “portals to a new world,” one that she was previously uncomfortable feeling entitled to on the basis of so much of indie rock’s masculinist gatekeeping of male-coded spaces. The inclusion of artists such as Bon Iver, St. Vincent, and Muse on *Twilight*’s soundtracks made Gilke feel welcome; she notes that she might not have eventually pursued a career writing about music without this reassurance that indie music “had a place for [her].” Although only one individual’s experience, Gilke’s fond memories of these soundtracks and their bolstering of her confidence as a fan and eventual interlocutor speaks volumes — pun intended — of the affective intensity of feeling included, validated, and *seen* by a musical genre that rarely invited girls into its upper ranks. Remembering these soundtracks as a fluke or ‘ahead of their time’ only serves to flatten the complicated relationships between audiences, access, and media that I have continuously worked to excavate over the course of this dissertation. Similar to how we might aspire to approach the study of teen girl film from “a position that does not reinforce the kinds of aesthetic hierarchies that perpetuate the ‘silliness’ of girls and girl culture” (Colling 2014, 8), these texts’ messy intertextuality and imperfectness should not automatically preclude them from serious and thoughtful scholarly attention. Just as Samantha Colling (2014) notes that the scramble to justify one’s focus in girl studies or girls’ cultures results in the “guilty” reclamation of these texts while what the films *do* is overlooked, the uneven nostalgia for 2000s culture has left a pervasive gap in feminist media studies. By approaching these texts

with curiosity, care, and no small measure of personal investment, it is my hope that this project might serve as the start of a longer conversation about the messy intricacies of 2000s indie rock, gender, gatekeeping, access, and inspiration.

### ***Limitations and Contributions***

Part of what drew me to this research initially was the space in existing popular music studies to incorporate women and girls' experiences of 2000s indie rock. While music scholars have written about the evolution of indie out of punk, and from a mode of production/distribution into a veritable music genre, questions of gender rarely enter into these conversations beyond a tacit acknowledgement that indie — and indie rock in particular — exists as a notably male-heavy scene (Bannister 2006a, 2006b; Branch 2012; Houston 2012). This dissertation locates itself among a more recent wave of feminist music scholarship attempting to address this oversight (White 2006; Vesey 2021), limited in its scope and liable to reproduce certain exclusions of its own. Due to my own positionality as a Canadian, English-speaking scholar, I chose to focus on indie rock as it has existed, spread, and experienced processes of cultural mainstreaming within an American (and, by virtue of cultural imperialism, Canadian) context. I made a very conscious effort to select key informants of varied nationalities and backgrounds, however, all of the key informants I spoke to were ultimately experts who grew up in and were shaped by the media of Western, English-speaking nations.

Another key aspect of indie rock, and one that I have attempted to attend to in the various papers that make up this dissertation, is its whiteness. The persistent whiteness of the texts mentioned in these papers — and their assumed audiences — is staggering. If white girlhood is constructed as culturally inferior, then the narratives of racialized girls who are fans of these same texts are marginalized further still. One additional benefit to this cyclical nostalgia for

2000s music, then, has been the reclamation of racialized, queer, and other modes of girlhood that were poorly represented at the time (see Martis 2020; Akinfenwa 2020). Many rock subgenres of this era, from indie to emo, were steeped in whiteness, and there is incredible, ongoing scholarship on the interplay between masculinity and whiteness that plays out in alternative and indie music scenes (Bannister 2006a, 2006b; de Boise 2014). What is continuously overlooked has been the degree to which the murky cultural legibility of intermediaries like music supervisors and other music workers continues to play a role in reproducing these fields as overwhelmingly white, overwhelmingly privileged spaces. A recent article published by UK-based supervisor and key informant Jumi Akinfenwa (2020) titled “Why Are There So Few Black Music Supervisors?” is one of the only pieces of writing I could locate — scholarly, popular, or otherwise — to address this dissonance head-on. As Akinfenwa notes in the article, “seeing how influential Black culture and music is [in contemporary sync projects], it would be easy to assume that the field is full of Black tastemakers, however, you’d be mistaken.” In addition to many people simply not knowing about more niche (but potentially more influential) roles like sync and music supervision over A&R or management, the industry as a whole “isn’t necessarily designed with Black people in mind” (Attoh-Wood, quoted in Akinfenwa 2020). The whiteness of the industry is further perpetuated by barriers to entry such as unpaid internships, which preclude people from seeing a way into music that does not already assume a certain class status.<sup>5</sup> Laura Young, reflecting on her time as a young blogger embedded in the New York City indie rock scene, notes that class likely went a long way in both ensuring

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<sup>5</sup> The systemic nature of these barriers is corroborated by data collected by reports such as a recent effort by the UK-based Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, which found that music and other creative industries have an especially egregious problem with social mobility and what the independent research centre terms “middle class origin dominance.” For more detail, see Carey et al. 2021.

her access to music spaces and limiting the discrimination she faced as a Chinese American woman:

Who gets the opportunity to write about these things? Like you're talking about writing about music and having the money to go to shows and stuff like that. That obviously attracts a certain type of person. [...] I grew up around a lot of people who were white, so it was almost natural for me to be in that space. When you're in spaces where you're the only person of colour, you notice it. But for me personally, it's not something that is unfamiliar to me or that I would notice as being something unwelcoming or strange. It didn't really come into play. Also because of some of the class issues as well, I think.

Any conversation that hopes to broach the gendered dimensions of music scenes and tastemaking require a certain degree of intersectional analysis in order to appreciate the nuance implicit to these questions, however, this remains an area with the potential for deeper study. As Young notes above, who has access to these spaces and opportunities to act as tastemakers? What is the relationship between identity categories such as race, class, and gender that shape who will pay attention once you do? And what are some of the broader systemic changes required of the music industry to address this self-perpetuating hegemony, beyond campaigns for representation that ultimately do little to address the root causes contributing to its lack in the first place?

The five chapters that make up this dissertation are intended to contribute to disciplinary discussions in popular music studies, feminist media studies, and girls studies. Considerations of women, girls, and girl culture's place in masculinist genres such as indie rock have been infrequent, and it is at this intersection that this research situates itself. In particular, the voices of cultural intermediaries and music workers are frequently missing from popular music studies explorations of genre boundaries and industry shifts; a silence I have attempted to address in this work by interspersing material from key informant interviews, public talks, and journalistic sources alongside more traditional, scholarly sources. Scholarship in feminist media studies and girls studies have tended to focus on girls' role as fans and audiences of exclusionary music scenes, rather than agents and interlocutors shaping the contours of music spaces from within the

industry itself. As I have made clear throughout this dissertation, the role of women and girls in 2000s indie rock is not an uncomplicated one; as noted above, there is still remarkable privilege at work in reproducing these indie rock scenes and texts as exceptionally white and classed spaces. Rather, this research has attempted to enter the conversation from a different viewpoint, considering media histories and the overlap between various media forms (i.e. television soundtracks, music blogs, canonical bands in film) to trace the contours of indie as it shifted from a niche genre to a mainstream sound, aesthetic, and cultural sensibility. Far from being a thing of the not-so-distant past, I argue, indie rock continues to shape ongoing questions of musical authenticity, access, influence, and inspiration.

### ***Indie Rock Futures***

In August 2021, New Zealand pop singer Lorde released “Mood Ring,” the third and final single heralding the arrival of her much anticipated third album. In soft vocals floating above dreamy acoustic guitar, she asks: “Don’t you think the early 2000s seem so far away?” It’s certainly tempting to believe her — the space between contemporary popular music and the indie rock boom of the 2000s can seem immense. Dave Holmes, writing for *Esquire* in 2019, refers to the 2000s as the “deleted years.” The music of this decade, he notes, has been “lost down a new-millennium memory hole” as the internet effectively changed forever the ways in which music was released, acquired, and experienced. I want to conclude with a challenge to this tendency to cast the 2000s as ephemeral and thus inconsequential. If this dissertation has accomplished anything, I hope it serves as a starting point to challenge and complicate the stories we tell about this era of music and culture. Let the histories and stories I’ve gathered here serve as evidence that, rather than being deserving of deletion, the 2000s were a pivotal time for questions of audience, access, and who gets to define ‘good’ music.

The threads of connection between this era and contemporary indie rock are frequent, joyous, and weird. The first time I saw Phoebe Bridgers perform live, she was opening for Bright Eyes' prolific frontman Conor Oberst; a little over a year later, the two released and toured an album together as Better Oblivion Community Centre. Bridgers also appears as a guest artist on the Killers' newest album, released in August 2021, and provided the liner notes for Bon Iver's tenth anniversary re-issue of his album *Bon Iver, Bon Iver*, released in January 2021. In the early days of intensive COVID-19 lockdowns across the United States, Death Cab for Cutie frontman Ben Gibbard played a series of livestream concerts that included a cover of Bridger's "Motion Sickness;" he names Bridgers as a "phenomenal young songwriter" and mentions that he is a "huge fan of [her] music." Gibbard also interviewed Michelle Zauner, the lead singer of Japanese Breakfast and author of 2021's bestselling memoir *Crying in H-Mart*, during a livestream book tour date; Zauner let on midway through that Death Cab have been a favourite of hers for years and that Peter Bradley, her husband and bandmate, had been sitting off-screen the entire interview nerding out alongside her. Zauner was also interviewed by Yeah Yeah Yeahs' Karen O in the course of doing press for her memoir and the band's newest album, released in June 2021. "I've had anxiety all day about meeting you," confesses Zauner, "Because you've meant so much to my life."<sup>6</sup> Barteas Strange, an English-born, Oklahoma-raised musician who has been consistently vocal about the lack of Black voices in indie rock, released an EP in March 2020 of The National covers, noting that "[The National's] music has meant everything to me over the years."<sup>7</sup> The covers EP was released on The National's members Aaron and Bryce Dessner's

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<sup>6</sup> This connection in particular is no doubt strengthened by both Zauner and O's experience of coming up as Korean American women in very white, very male-dominated music scenes; Sarah MacDonald (2017) writes that "you can see [Karen O's] fingerprints all over [contemporary indie rock]." As Zauner reflects, "When I discovered [Yeah Yeah Yeahs'], it's like my entire world had been flipped; it seemed impossible that someone like me, and with my cultural background, could find themselves in [that] kind of place."

<sup>7</sup> The conversation about the pervasive whiteness of indie rock has only recently gone more mainstream. In a 2020 piece for *Pitchfork* entitled "What It's Like to Be Black in Indie Music," Matthew James-Wilson notes that in order

own Brassland label, paving the way for Strange’s full-length album release to widespread critical acclaim later in 2020 and a busy 2021 spent opening national tour dates for both Lucy Dacus and Phoebe Bridgers. Mutual appreciation and respect for indie rock artistry flows both ways across these generational divides. In spite of this, there seems to be a particular reticence around identifying 2000s indie as an influence on today’s indie rock in any kind of direct or official way — at least in part because, I suspect, the contours of the industry and the types of artists who define indie rock in 2021 look so different from those that filled the scene twenty years ago.<sup>8</sup> The underlying assumption here, of course, is that the female, queer, and racialized artists who constitute today’s indie rock musicians were not fans (or at least not ‘real’ fans) of 2000s indie, effectively discounting this lineage even as it is the explanation that makes the most sense. Despite all its gatekeeping, indie rock audiences have always been diverse; today’s indie scenes serve as both overdue evidence and comeuppance. As Phoebe Bridgers reflected on Twitter after seeing her song covered by Ben Gibbard in early 2020, “[I] don’t need any more proof that tweenage me was a powerful indie rock witch.”

Identifying these through lines and echoes, like boygenius covering the Killers at the Wiltern, highlights indie musicianship as one site where legacies of 2000s indie rock continue to resonate. As Sara Ahmed (2013) has noted often, citation is a tool of feminist praxis — a reproductive technology and “a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies.”

Popularizing the stories of female cultural intermediaries are important precisely because they make room for *more*; researching this dissertation often felt like watching a giant, guitar-ripping

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for indie music to “live up to its original intentions and continue to hold itself to a higher standard [...], the community must seriously examine the system racism of its past and present.”

<sup>8</sup> There are also, notably, instances wherein a particularly visible 2000s artist is tokenized, as in the case of Paramore’s Hayley Williams. Williams has been named as the inspiration for a number of contemporary artists, from Olivia Rodrigo to Willow Smith; the ubiquity of these comparisons reinforces the narrow scope of visible female artists and female-fronted acts in the 2000s musical landscape (see Pelly 2018, Moreland 2021).

constellation of connections reveal itself in real time. Jessica Hopper, in conversation with NPR's Ann Powers on virtual book tour for the updated and expanded *First Collection of Criticism by a Living Female Rock Critic* (2021), remembers her mom bringing home an early galley of Powers' *Rock She Wrote* (1995) from her job at the local newspaper and having a rock and roll epiphany. "I [had just] put out the second or third issue of my zine," she notes. "And I was like, *oh*, you can be a feminist music critic." Lizzy Goodman, the writer and oral historian responsible for *Meet Me in the Bathroom* (2017), arguably the definitive text on 2000s New York City garage rock, employed college-aged research assistants recruited from NYU's Clive Davis Institute of Recorded Music. One research assistant, Maggie Rogers, would go on to become a Grammy-nominated musician and return to Harvard for a graduate degree in "the ethics of power in pop culture" (2021). Another, a Connecticut-born musician named Eva Hendricks who reflects on the experience as "one of the best and most formative experiences of [her] life," would go on to form Charly Bliss, a band that puts on the some of the most high-energy shows and inspires some of the friendliest pits I've ever had the privilege of screaming in. Younger artists and cultural interlocutors have always found space in the stories of older music scenes and musical generations — if there is hope or joy to be written into indie rock futures, it is in this constant expansion, making room for new bodies and stories while holding space for those that have been there all along.



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### ***Chasing the 'Bedroom Sound': Indie Negotiations of Space and Gender***

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### ***Below the Line, Behind the Scenes: Music Supervisors as Cultural Intermediaries***

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### ***Front Row Girls: Deconstructing the Rock Critic Industrial Complex***

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## Appendix A: Key Informant Profiles

### *Jumi Akinfenwa*

When we spoke in summer 2020, Jumi was in the process of leaving her position as a music supervisor with Pitch & Sync, a music and sound agency with studios based in London, Berlin, and Amsterdam. The licensing and sync jobs that Jumi handled during her time with Pitch & Sync were primarily for commercials and other forms of advertising but, like the other music supervisors I interviewed, her fascination with music supervision grew out of a love of television and film soundtracks. In addition to music supervision experience, Jumi is a freelance music and culture writer for various outlets and often writes about racial inequity in the music industry. She was co-chair (2019-2020) of the Intersectionality Committee with She Said So, a global network of women and gender minorities in the music industry that offers mentorship opportunities and programming to young BIPOC music workers, including music supervisors. Jumi is currently based in London, working as the music coordinator for Amazon Studio's European division.

### *Dondrea Erauw*

After realizing that her dreams of becoming a rock star weren't panning out, Dondrea transferred into a music industry arts program and soon landed her first job in music supervision. She moved to Los Angeles and continues to work for Instinct Entertainment, a Toronto-based entertainment company that specializes in music licensing and sync. Dondrea's sync projects have included the Netflix Original series *Spinning Out* (2020), *The Kid Detective* (2020), and *Degrassi: Next Class* (2016-2017). Dondrea also worked on *The Cuban* (2019), a project that was awarded Best Music Supervision for Film Budgeted Under 5 Million at the 2020 Guild of Music Supervisors Awards; Dondrea has also collected an award for Best Feature Film for her work on *Kiss and Cry* (2017). Dondrea is a member of the Television Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Guild of Music Supervisors. In fall 2020, she helped organize *Sound + Vision*, a virtual sync conference that is now in its second year. She continues to play music, compile *O.C.* fanmixes, and nurse a healthy obsession with Paramore's Hayley Williams from her home in Los Angeles.

### *Sarah Lewitinn*

Growing up across the Hudson River from Manhattan in Tenafly, New Jersey, Sarah landed her first job in media during high school interning for ABC. She started interning for Marc Spitz at *SPIN Magazine* in 1998, where she worked for several years before launching her personal blog under the moniker Ultragrerrl. In 2001, Sarah graduated with a marketing degree from Fashion Institute of Technology and in 2002, she was the first manager for local bands stellastarr\* and My Chemical Romance, both prior to their first major record deals. In 2005, Sarah quit *SPIN* to start her own record label in partnership with Island Def Jam Records and by 2006, *New York Magazine* had named Sarah as one of the "most influential people in music." During this time, Sarah also worked as a DJ and, along with New York-based publicist Karen Ruttner, threw a weekly dance party called "Stolen Transmission" at various locations across Manhattan's Lower

East Side. The event won two *Paper Magazine* Nightlife Awards for People's Choice Best Party in 2005 and 2006, and Sarah herself won People's Choice for Best DJ those two years as well. Sarah is currently based in Los Angeles, where she works as the music director for the clothing brand Aritzia. She has kept her blog online in its entirety.

### ***Audrey Neustadter***

Originally from Paris, Audrey moved to New York City after earning a journalism degree from the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Georgia. Audrey started blogging as "Melody Nelson" in 2001 while she was working as a project and account manager for the high-profile graphic design firm Deepend. During this time, she also booked and promoted shows for various New York venues, worked as a DJ, and hosted a weekly radio show on East Village Radio. In 2008, Audrey returned to school to pursue a degree in fashion design from Parsons School of Design at New York's New School. After graduation, following a year of freelance work, Audrey moved to Los Angeles to pursue a new career in brand management, communications strategy, and social media consulting. Audrey currently works as the director of communications for L-Acoustics, a French sound system and amplifier manufacturer. She has deleted her blog from the internet, but keeps an archived version saved.

### ***Giulia Pines***

Growing up on New York's Upper West Side, Giulia was a short subway ride from downtown Manhattan and starting writing about shows on her blog, *New York Doll*, while she was still in high school. Giulia began attending Columbia University for journalism in 2003 and her personal blog gradually took a back seat to her responsibilities as music editor for the university paper, the *Columbia Daily Spectator*. After graduation, Giulia moved to Berlin and worked as a food and travel writer for the better part of a decade before returning to New York in 2018, where she now lives in Queens. Giulia has published articles in the *New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *BBC Travel*, *Curbed*, and *Vox*, and continues to work as a freelance journalist and content marketing manager for corporate clients. She has contributed content to multiple travel books and served as a recipe editor for *Stay for Breakfast!* (2017) and *Divine Food* (2016). Giulia continues to pursue her love of photography and writing from Jackson Heights, Queens. She has deleted *New York Doll* from the internet, but maintains a secret page on her current website of old concert photos.

### ***Lindsay Wolfington***

Part of the same wave of early-2000s soundtracks that saw the rise of prolific music supervisors like Alexandra Patsavas, Lindsay was responsible for the music of *Smallville* (2003-2005), *One Tree Hill* (2004-2012), and *Ghost Whisperer* (2006-2010). More recently, Lindsay won the 2018 Guild of Music Supervisors Award for her work on *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (2018) and has received four nominations for her work on *The Royals* (2015-2018) and *The Sing Off* (2009-2014). Lindsay teaches as an adjunct instructor in the music industry program at the University

of Southern California's Thornton School of Music and sits on the board of the Guild of Music Supervisors, where she is actively involved in mentoring young supervisors as well as generally promoting music supervision as a craft. Lindsay is currently based in Los Angeles.

### ***Laura Young***

Born and raised on Long Island in a suburb of New York City, Laura was one of the first fans of the city's nascent indie rock scene to start blogging about it. *The Modern Age* set the standard for other music bloggers in the city and Laura's photographs and concert reviews would go on to be re-printed in *New Music Enquiry (NME)* and other major music outlets. Laura attended NYU for journalism and gradually transitioned from music coverage into food and travel writing. In 2016, Laura moved to Denver, where she maintains a popular blog for new Denverites called *The New Denizen* and continues to publish online travel guides and pursue food photography. Her blog (as well as a related Facebook community group) was mentioned in a recent *New York Times* article about former New Yorkers adapting to their new hometowns. Laura has kept *The Modern Age* online in its entirety.

## **Appendix B: Sample Interview Protocol**

### ***Section I: Identifying Questions***

1. Where were you born?
2. What is your earliest memory of music feeling important to you?
3. What music felt especially formative for you growing up?
4. How did you discover new music as a young person?

### ***Section II: Music Supervision***

1. Were there any films or TV shows whose music really impacted you growing up?
2. What made you want to become a music supervisor?
3. One of the main things I'm interested in exploring is this idea that movies and television were one of the main sources of discovering new music in a pre-streaming era. Do you think that film/TV still has that same kind of tastemaking power today?
4. Can you talk about the tension of licensing indie bands? Have you ever encountered resistance from a band who didn't want their music licensed?
5. Of all the jobs in film, music supervision tends to come closest to gender parity. Why do you think that is? Can you tell me a story about a time that you noticed gender at work?
6. Have you noticed a shift in the way that music supervisors are appreciated or understood since you started working in the field?
7. You've talked elsewhere about how the tone or the vibe of a particular project informs which music you include. Is there anything that feels different when you're working on a show or content for teens or younger people?
8. Where do you discover new music for work? For your own listening?

### ***Section III: Music Blogging/Writing***

1. What made you first want to start writing about music?
2. What did you see as the purpose or mission of your blog at the time? Was it something you just did for fun or did it feel more serious/like you had a responsibility?
3. There are a lot of different ways that people try and describe the style or genre of music that was coming up in NYC at the time. How would you describe it/your musical taste at the time?
4. Did you read other peoples' music writing and criticism at the time? Do you now?
5. Did the music scenes you were involved in at the time feel welcoming to you? Do you think it was significant that most of the bloggers working the NYC scene at the time were young women?
6. How did the writing on your blog differ from the writing you were doing elsewhere?
7. Can you talk a little bit about your involvement with more mainstream music outlets? How did you feel about those working relationships at the time?

8. What made a really good show? Are there any particular shows that stand out in your memory?
9. What prompted the decision to keep your blog online/delete your blog?
10. What made you want to keep working with music/leave the music industry for something different?

***Section IV: Time, Memory, and Nostalgia***

1. How were you thinking about music in the 2000s?
2. Where did you hear about new music during this time period?
3. What comes to mind when you think about 2000s music/media?
4. Are you nostalgic now for this period of time in your life? For this era of music?
5. What do you think is different now about the ways people discover music?
6. What does your current relationship to music look like?