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THE IMPORTANCE OF FEMALE BASS PLAYERS: HOW THEY HAVE INFLUENCED
AND SHAPED OUR CONCEPTION OF MUSIC

A Project Report Submitted to the Faculty of the College of Arts and Humanities in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
At
Lindenwood University

By

Jessica Sacks
Saint Charles, Missouri

December 2023

THE IMPORTANCE OF FEMALE BASS PLAYERS: HOW THEY HAVE INFLUENCED
AND SHAPED OUR CONCEPTION OF MUSIC

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Degree of Master of Arts in Studio Art
At
Lindenwood University

December 2023, Jessica Sacks

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ABSTRACT

THE IMPORTANCE OF FEMALE BASS PLAYERS: HOW THEY HAVE INFLUENCED AND SHAPED OUR CONCEPTION OF MUSIC

Jessica Sacks, Master of Arts, 2023

Thesis Report Directed by: Joseph Weber, Department Head- Art, Design, and Production

Music allows us to think creatively, dream, and create a soundtrack for our lives. When we think of female artists, most people recognize singers, but I want to describe how women have shaped music for over sixty years with their fantastic playing abilities. This project will analyze how female bass players have contributed to American music and society.

Keywords: Bass players, Women, Carol Kaye, Kim Gordon, Tina Weymouth, Kim Deal

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Introduction

This project was originally influenced by the work Jean-Michel Basquiat created to bring awareness to underrepresented jazz musicians. He would take elements from his environment such as graffiti and music to compose completely original artwork, just like a jazz musician who takes different motifs from different genres of music to compose their own solos. Basquiat raised awareness in his paintings about underrepresented jazz musicians such as Charlie Parker. He would take different elements from Charlie Parker's personal life and musical projects to make paintings that were inspired by the way Charlie Parker would improvise his solos. I am inspired by how Basquiat brought a new world audience to these underrepresented African American musicians and how his paintings depicted their greatness. This inspiration has led me to focus my project on underrepresented women bassists and how they have contributed to our American music culture and society.

Women are extremely underrepresented in the music industry. A nine year study from the Billboard Hot 100 Year- End Charts provided by USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative shows that only 21.6% of artists were Women across those nine years. "The 2020 percentage reflects the reality that there has been no meaningful and sustained increase in the percentage of women artists in nearly a decade. Few women appeared on the chart in duos (7.1%) or bands (7.3%) and were most likely to perform as solo artists (30%)."¹ These numbers provide evidence that women are mostly recognized only as vocalists and more than ever we need to include and represent the women instrumental musicians in the music industry. Gender has played a dramatic role in why there are so few women playing instruments in popular music. The music industry pushes artists into stereotypical gender roles and only value Women for physical attractiveness

¹ (Communication and Marketing Staff 2021)

and devalue their talent as performers. “Because instrument playing is so strongly linked to notions of rock creativity, the traditional restriction of women to the role of vocalist, while found in most American pop genres, is especially disempowering in rock music.”² When the music industry inherently puts women in stereotypical roles, this gives them less opportunities to be creative and able to express themselves through instrumental music. Mainstream society is often uncomfortable when seeing women perform masculine norms. Since pop and rock music is seen as masculine, women are unable to find the creative freedom and respect they deserve as musicians.

This project brings awareness to four female bass players that went against societal norms to create a space where women are seen for their musical talent and not their appearance. Their contributions in the music industry have inspired more women to become instrumentalists and helped shape our music scene over the course of seventy years. The purpose of this project is to show the accomplishments of these remarkable women and to bring a new audience to these women through my artwork.

²Clawson, Mary Ann. "When women play the bass: Instrument specialization and gender interpretation in alternative rock music." In *Rock Music*, pp. 151-168. Routledge, 2017.

Literature Review

Carol Kaye



Legendary composer Quincy Jones is quoted as saying “Carol Kaye is the best bassist I’ve ever heard” and wrote in his book *Q* that “Some women jazz musicians were so great, they would leave the men in the dust with their playing.”³ For more than 60 years, Carol Kaye has contributed to society through her playing with jazz musicians, studio work with the Wrecking Crew, teaching, and writing books about playing music.

Carol Kaye was born in 1935 in Everett, Washington.⁴ Her parents were both professional musicians; her father played trombone in a WW1 military band, various Dixieland bands, and assorted theater orchestras, and her mother was a classical and ragtime pianist who worked playing music for silent films in the 1920s.⁵ In 1941, the family moved to California seeking a better life, but tension grew between Carol’s parents, and they divorced. Carol and her mother moved to Wilmington by the Port of Los Angeles into a housing project, surviving off of welfare.⁶ By the age of thirteen, Carol had taught herself how to play guitar and by chance tagged along with one of her friends to their guitar lessons. The teacher, Horace Hatchett, was impressed with Carol’s musical ability and started mentoring her with lessons and gigs of her own. Her teenage years were spent playing all over Los Angeles in jazz clubs earning money to take care of her mother. One night when performing jazz guitar with the Teddy Edward’s combo at the Beverly Caverns night club, a record producer named Bumps Blackwell asked Carol if she would play on some record dates.⁷ Her first session recordings were for Sam Cooke, and Carol was delighted with the caliber of musicians hired to play on these recordings. The musicians

³ Doug, Doyle, *Pioneering Bassist and Guitarist Carol Kaye surveys her career in music, including her time in jazz clubs*. March 18, 2021.

⁴ Kent Hartman, *The Wrecking Crew: The Inside Story of Rock and Roll's Best-Kept Secret*. Macmillan, 2012.

⁵ Hartman, *The Wrecking Crew*.

⁶ Hartman, *The Wrecking Crew*.

⁷ Hartman, *The Wrecking Crew*.

hired to play on session recordings were all jazz or trained musicians during the 1960s. Pop and Rock music was taking over, and record producers were hiring qualified musicians to perform so they could make more money and produce as many songs as possible. After five years of session work on the guitar, Carol ended up subbing for bass when a musician did not show up for the gig. This was her calling-Carol Kaye ended up being the number one bass player for all session work in Los Angeles until the 1970s. “With over 10,000 record dates and film calls from 1964 through approximately 1973, Carol Kaye is, arguably, the most recorded bassist in music history.”⁸

⁸ Jon Liebman, “Carol Kaye”. July 21, 2014.
<https://forbassplayersonly.com/interview-carol-kaye/>

Tina Weymouth



Tina Weymouth has always been more than ‘the girl in the band’. As the bassist of the art-pop group Talking Heads, and later in Tom Tom Club, Weymouth’s sonic funkiness and playful performance style proved essential to solidifying each band’s distinct sound and image.⁹ Weymouth was one of the first women in the 1970s to play an instrument in a successful rock band. Without her unique sound, we would not have songs such as “Psycho Killer”, “Burning Down the House”, or “Once in a Lifetime”. She always played an androgynous role, cutting her hair short and wearing jumpsuits or t-shirts and jeans to look genderless. Her musicianship always came first and has inspired generations of women that they can also be a musician in a rock band.

Martina Michele Weymouth was born in Coronado, California on November 22, 1950. Her father Ralph was a Navy Admiral, and her mother was from France. She had seven siblings and they grew up in Belgium, France, Hawaii, Iceland, Los Angeles, Switzerland, and Washington D.C. Moving around so often made Tina a very shy child and teenager.¹⁰ As a teenager Tina’s musical influences were different folk groups such as Peter, Paul, and Mary and Bob Dylan. During this time period, Tina taught herself how to play the acoustic guitar.¹¹

In 1971, Tina met Chris Frantz, who would later become her husband and bandmate at the Rhode Island School of Design. Chris and Tina instantly became friends and shared an art studio together as painters. They both loved the same type of art and listening to funk and Motown records.¹² This is where they would also meet David Byrne. Chris and David started playing music together and could not find a bass player. David dropped out of school and moved to New York. Shortly after graduating, Chris and Tina rented a loft without heat or a bathroom

⁹ Olivia Aylmer, “Talking Heads bassist Tina Weymouth’s Electrifying Style.” May 10, 2017

¹⁰ David Bowman, *This Must Be the Place*. Harper Collins, 2009.

¹¹ Aylmer, “Talking Heads bassist Tina Weymouth’s Electrifying Style.” May 10, 2017

¹² Chris Frantz, “*Remain in Love: Talking Heads, Tom Tom Club, Tina.*”

with David Byrne. The trio loved living so close to the music venue CBGB's and befriended the musicians from Blondie, the Ramones, Television, and the Patti Smith Group.¹³

Chris and David continued looking for a bass player without success until one day Tina came home with a 1963 Fender Precision Bass Guitar.¹⁴ Tina was determined to learn how to play the bass, and five months later, the Talking Heads were playing their first gigs.

Even though the Talking Heads would go on to make eight studio albums and be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2002, Weymouth still has not received the recognition she deserves for her work in this band. For many years, David Byrne would take all writing credits for their lyrics and music, and his ego would overshadow everyone else in this collaborative band.

In 1981, when the Talking Heads were on a hiatus, Chris and Tina decided to start a side project called Tom Tom Club.¹⁵ Eventually, this project would become Chris and Tina's main focus once the Talking Heads stopped playing together in 1991. Tom Tom Club's first album received rave reviews and had several number one hits such as "Genius of Love" and "Wordy Rappinghood."¹⁶ These songs would go on to be sampled in songs by Grandmaster Flash, Mariah Carey, Selena Gomez, and many more artists and commercials today. Tina has always been a pioneer in the music industry, and her unique musical style and life continues to inspire future generations.

¹³ Frantz, "Remain in Love: Talking Heads, Tom Tom Club, Tina."

¹⁴ Frantz, "Remain in Love: Talking Heads, Tom Tom Club, Tina."

¹⁵ Frantz, "Remain in Love: Talking Heads, Tom Tom Club, Tina."

¹⁶ Rebecca Willa Davis, "Rip 'Her' To Shreds: How the Women of 1970s New York Punk Defied Gender Norms." *New York: Columbia University* 2007.

Kim Gordon



Rolling Stone magazine has described Kim Gordon as “The Godmother of grunge”¹⁷, and for the past thirty years, she has inspired a younger generation with her music and visual art. Born in 1953 into an educated family, Kim’s father was a professor at UCLA and her mother was a seamstress who sold clothing along with other artists in California. Kim attended an experimental elementary school where the children were not given grades and were taught in a child-centered environment. This gave Kim and her brother Keller the opportunity to be free-thinking as children and not defined by a normal grade-based public school education. Kim’s father was given many opportunities through UCLA to research and teach in Hawaii and Hong Kong during her formative years. This would give Kim a worldly perspective and further promote her interest in the arts. Besides these experiences, music was always a part of their daily life. Kim’s father enjoyed Jazz and introduced Coltrane, Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, and Stan Getz.¹⁸

In 1972, Gordon attended Santa Monica College. Even though she wanted to go to art school, her father convinced her that a general bachelor’s degree would be more beneficial.¹⁹ During this time, her brother Keller was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. With his erratic and sometimes violent behavior, Kim moved out of her parents’ home and lived for the next couple of years with various friends and boyfriends. In 1974, Kim transferred to York University in Canada. She had a friend from high school that went to school there and learned about the interdisciplinary art program. Kim’s first band would be a part of an art project for a media class

¹⁷ O’Dair, Barbara. “Kim Gordon: The Godmother of Grunge on Feminism in Rock.” November 13, 1997.

¹⁸ Kim Gordon, *Girl in a Band*. Le Mot et le reste, 2017.

¹⁹ Gordon, *Girl in a Band*. pg 68.

taught by George Manupelli, the founder of the Ann Arbor Film Festival.²⁰ The band performed at the festival. “We were, I remember, an explosive mess, pure mayhem and caterwauling. We danced, tossed our tambourines onto the ground, and let everything fall apart into a garage noise jam.”²¹ During the mayhem, the plug was pulled on them mid-set. From this experience, Gordon learned that she loved performing in front of an audience. Aside from this project, York University was disappointing, and Kim moved back to California and finished her art degree at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles.

Gordon moved to New York in 1980. During this time, the art scene was consumer-based and art was not seen for its beauty, but as a commodity. Graffiti artists were becoming popular and art dealers and gallery owners were trying to make as much money as possible. Women were not taken seriously for their art and were dismissed if their artwork seemed too feminist-oriented.²² Kim was completely turned off by this mindset, which led her to consider working in music. The No Wave music movement was happening in downtown New York and Kim was drawn to the excitement. The music was abstract, free, and pure. It was a reaction to the commercial New Wave, and No Wave was there to destroy how rock music was perceived.

Kim Gordon met the guitarist Thurston Moore after his last performance with his band, the Coachmen. They immediately became friends, started dating, and began playing music together. They were inspired by different musicians such as Television, Patti Smith, Lydia Lunch, DNA, and other No Wave musicians. From these influences, they started the band Sonic Youth with Lee Ranaldo. Sonic Youth had their first gig at a Noise Fest that Thurston had created to expose this “new music” that was being created out of the No Wave movement.²³

²⁰ Thomas S. Caw, "Gender Trouble Girl: The Disruptive Work of Kim Gordon." (2005).

²¹ Gordon, *Girl in a Band*. pg 68.

²² Caw, "Gender Trouble Girl: The Disruptive Work of Kim Gordon." pg. 12

²³ Gordon, *Girl in a Band*.

Sonic Youth would go on to inspire the alternative rock and the grunge era of the nineties. The band Nirvana was mentored by Sonic Youth, and eventually, they signed to the same label, Geffen Records.²⁴ Sonic Youth was known for their experimental use of chord structures, tuning, and song form, and for using powered drills and drumsticks to create new sounds on their instruments. The band worked as a collective and each person had an equal role in creating the music and vocal elements of each song. Gordon was able to use her visual art background to develop the artwork, merchandise, and posters, and help direct the music videos for the band.

Gordon herself would also inspire the Riot Grrl movement. Bikini Kill's Kathleen Hanna has spoken in length about her idol: "She was a forerunner, musically. Just knowing a woman was in a band trading lead vocals, playing bass, and being a visual artist at the same time made me feel less alone. Kim made me feel accepted in a way I hadn't before."²⁵ This statement alone has inspired thousands of women to explore music and start playing instruments.

²⁴ Caw, "Gender Trouble Girl: The Disruptive Work of Kim Gordon." pg. 27

²⁵ Jisselle Fernandez, "Women in Music History: Kim Gordon." March 26, 2020

Kim Deal



The Pixies were one of the most popular underground bands of the late 1980s and early 1990s. They inspired bands such as Nirvana, Radiohead, and Weezer. “Kurt Cobain told *Melody Maker* in 1992, ‘I wish Kim [had been] allowed to write more songs for the Pixies, because ‘Gigantic’ is the best Pixies song, and Kim wrote it.’²⁶ The bands that were inspired by the Pixies did not have any female members and yet, they were influenced by Deal’s songwriting, vocals, and bass playing.

Kimberly Ann Deal and her identical twin sister were born on June 10, 1961 in Dayton, Ohio. Her father, Robert Edward Deal, was a physicist at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, and her mother was a teacher. Besides her twin sister, Kim has an older brother. “In the Deal household, the twins often provided the soundtrack. Their mother, Ann, had a reel-to-reel and would sometimes record Kim and Kelley singing. When the girls were 13, their dad started taking acoustic guitar lessons – “He took three lessons and bought a \$50 guitar.” Before long Kim was plucking out songs like Roger Miller’s “King of the Road”.²⁷

The twins spent their teenage years performing in dive bars, churches, restaurants, and weddings. Kim enrolled in college, although it did not last long. She ended up working in retail until she finally found a good fit at Kettering College of Medical Arts, just south of Dayton, where she studied medical laboratory technology.²⁸ In 1984, Kim met her husband and they married and moved to Boston. While working in a doctor’s office doing lab tests, Deal spotted an ad in *The Boston Phoenix* placed by Charles Thompson, who would later be known as Black Francis. “Band seeks bassist into Hüsker Dü and Peter, Paul and Mary. Please – no chops.”²⁹ Kim

²⁶ Ann Friedman, “Kim Deal,” *The Gentlewoman*, 2018, <https://thegentlewoman.co.uk/library/kim-deal>.

²⁷ Friedman, “Kim Deal.”

²⁸ Friedman, “Kim Deal.”

²⁹ Friedman, “Kim Deal.”

found this posting hilarious and intriguing and ended up forming a friendship with Thompson and Santiago. They formed the band the Pixies with drummer David Lovering.

In 1988, they made their first full length album called *Surfer Rosa*. “My initial impression of her was that she was very good-humoured and a great bass player,” Steve Albini, the recording engineer behind thousands of albums and the producer of *Surfer Rosa*, tells me by email. “And then when she started singing, my jaw kinda dropped. Her voice was so charming and effervescent.”³⁰ “The Pixies would eventually be hailed as the band that ushered in the “loud-quiet-loud” sound that would dominate the next decade of rock music.”³¹

Kim started the Breeders as a side project in 1989. Their first album was a commercial success and praised by critics. The Pixies broke up in 1993 and the Breeders became Kim and her sister Kelley’s main project. They made one more full length album before drugs and alcohol would consume the band and Kelley would be arrested for heroin and go to rehab in 1995.³²

The Pixies would reunite in 2004 and tour for the next nine years. Kim would leave the band permanently in 2013. Today, Kim and Kelley are sober and are writing and recording new music for the Breeders. Throughout Kim Deal’s career, she has been praised for her musicianship and not as some girl in the band. She has had great success and continues to inspire musicians today.

³⁰ Friedman, “Kim Deal.”

³¹ Friedman, “Kim Deal.”

³² Jude Rogers, “It Used to Be about Music. Now, without the Drink, It's Good to Go Back to That'” *The Guardian* (*Guardian News and Media*, May 2, 2009), <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/may/03/breeders-interview-pixies-kim-deal>.

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