

A Professional's Perspective On Sexism In The Music Industry

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I walked into the venue and found the sound guy. I introduced myself, handed him my audio transmitter and asked if he could give me an XLR mix out. “Why,” he asks. “I am filming the show and need clean audio.” “Yeah, but what is this going to?” he asks. “A wireless receiver,” I reply. “Who is running it?” “I am,” I tell him. He wants to know where and if he can see it. “It’s on the other side of the room. It’s just a basic receiver. It’s on and programmed. All I need is an XLR mix out. It’s all dialed in.”

“Don’t get b*tchy.” He smiled. It didn’t feel like what you’d call a friendly smile. He continued, “This is a direct board feed, you won’t get much bass so you’ll need a room mic.” He seemed surprised that I knew, let alone had one already set up. Then went further. “The line I’m giving you is mono not stereo, someone will have to help you with that and the vocals are going to be hot. Hot means loud...”

And with his increasing condescension, I feel my ears turn red and I tuned out. When he finished, I say, “Got it, can you run this or not?” He plugs in the transmitter, and I hear “B*tch” under his breath as I walk away.

That happens more times than I wish it did. Funny thing is, when my male assistant asks, the answer is either “Sure,” “Nope,” or “Will a stereo line work?” I’ve never seen them say anything else, let alone take 10 minutes to give him a dissertation on what a board feed is, sounds like or what else he’s going to need. And I’ve never heard them tell him, “*Don’t get b*tchy.*”

I’ve worked in the music industry for over 30 years. In that time, my boobs have gotten me in serious trouble. Not because I’ve used them for anything or shown them around. I keep these babies on lock down. But they exist and people know it and sometimes they make me feel like they think I can’t do my job because of them.

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I was at a dinner party a few weeks ago and a woman who has been an executive with a world-renowned recording studio for 20 years walked in. When someone asked, "How is work?" She said, "Oh, you know, just trying to manage with my tiny girl brain." I howled — not only because the comment was funny, and it was, but because I knew all too well what she meant.

We've all read stories about female artists in the business. I Googled "Sexism in the music industry" and it yielded 610,000 results. Almost all of them related to female artists. When I reached out about this piece I was inundated with stories from and about female artists. What I couldn't seem to find were stories from women industry professionals — label heads, publicists, managers, visual artists like myself.

And once I started calling them, I realized this was a whole new ballgame. Many gave me stories, but all of them asked to remain anonymous or to not tell it at all because it would out them. They all felt like they would be fired, blackballed, it would get worse or it would perpetuate the b*tchy, slutty, crazy appellations they are already fighting. I understood it, but it bothered me.

We've all had those blatant moments. In the three decades I've been in this game, I've been manhandled, grabbed, groped and violated in inconceivable ways. I've thrown out torn clothing and cleaned bloodstains while I refused tears I was too proud to let fall. I've been called a whore, a tease, a groupie, a sycophant and everything in between. That sh*t is not ok, but I'm guessing none of it is news for any woman who works in a male-dominated field.

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To tell you the truth, as bad as that stuff is, it's when my abilities come into question that I get pissed off. Defending my body can happen when I go to Walgreens, but when you dismiss my intellect or capacity to perform as a professional simply because I have boobs, that's weird, and you and I now have a situation.

I sat down with the woman I was talking about earlier, along with three other very powerful women in the music industry to discuss this topic. It was fascinating. We all felt marginalized, ignored, disregarded and disrespected in instances, where if the shoe were on the foot of a man with our credentials, it would never have happened.

The most fascinating part was that we all did the same thing in our girl brains. We questioned if we were actually on the receiving end of misogyny or were just being sensitive. "Did I imagine that or was it real?" The fact that we all thought it told me all I need to know.

I asked how we could change it. That was the only question met with uncomfortable silence and "hey, girl" shoulder shruggin'. Our careers revolve around music, which has always been the driving force behind change. It's the courage of the songwriter that plays in our minds when we hear a song that moves us. Be it political, personal or satirical. Artists are the people we get up and go to work for every day. How do we honor and respect them and not be that brave ourselves?

I certainly don't have the answers. I'm not even sure all of it is intentional. Some dudes have just always worked with dudes and some people make snap judgements. Never good. But I have noticed that more ladies run the show these days. And more women are stepping into the roles that have traditionally been occupied by men. That's good.

I'm going to start here. I'm going to put sound guys the world over on notice. Hey, sound guys, people with boobs also have the capacity to understand basic sound. There. I said it. Now, Do you have an XLR out or what?