

'Is your boyfriend in the band?' Critic airs tales of music industry sexism

Jessica Hopper put out a call for female colleagues to tell their stories, which ranged from enduring misogynistic comments to sexual assault

Amanda Holpuch in New York

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“Are those your boyfriend’s records?”

“Where’s the lead singer? Can’t be you, doll.”

“I hope your writing will be as good as your tits.”

If you’re a woman working in the music industry, chances are you’ve heard similar comments during your career. On Tuesday, music and culture critic Jessica Hopper used Twitter to put the spotlight on pervasive sexism staining the industry. She published the call-out after a discussion with Pitchfork writer Molly Beauchemin about about how female music fans tend not to be as respected as their male counterparts.

Hopper’s prompt unleashed a flurry of stories from female musicians who were asked by bartenders if they were the girlfriend of a band member when drinking at venue bars, music journalists who were asked to fetch water for the people they were about to interview and artists told to dress “a certain way”.

“What songs or albums could we hear if people weren’t being told they aren’t supposed to be here?” Hopper told the Guardian, bemoaning the music which will never be made due to such a toxic environment.

Hopper also said that she received private messages from people accusing famous artists of sexist behavior and even sharing stories of sexual assault. All reported being treated poorly by “people wielding power in really ugly ways”. This included recent experiences from female label executives and managers of chart-topping bands. “These are women who have the power to make and break careers,” Hopper said.

One of the women who responded to Hopper’s call is Jocelyn Brown, a DJ, music supervisor and producer.

Brown makes a point of exclusively using vinyl records for her sets. “I wanted to find a way to communicate that yes, these are my records, and they might be heavy but I’m the one carrying them, I’m the one doing the work and I’m calling the shots,” Brown said in an email.

She added that while women definitely managed to carve themselves a place in the industry in the past few decades, a lot of them have “paid very high prices on many different levels in order to get here and stay here”.

She said that as a woman of color, she is more frequently accused of being angry and aggressive, and it is assumed that her only expertise is in rap/hip-hop, funk, soul and other genres associated with the black community.

“My livelihood depends upon my having a well-rounded working knowledge of music across genres, and the interpersonal relationships to go along with that!” she said. “I know that I’m not alone in this - I’ve had similar exchanges happen when I’ve gone to shows, and I know that other people of color, both inside and outside of the music industry, have experienced this too.”

While the horror stories shared online could seem daunting to young women interested in a career in music, all the women the Guardian spoke with said that it is essential that women put themselves out there and create opportunities for themselves in the business.

That was the path for Jessica Zambri, a New York-based musician who performs with her sister in their eponymous band, Zambri. While the surname connotes a leading role in the band, Zambri still gets frustrated when she thinks about a gig in the early 2000s when an engineer went around and asked the three male members of their band what they needed, then came over to tell her and her sister how to use guitar pedals and plug in cords.

“We had put everything together, every piece of it - from music, to promoting, to gathering the band to teaching the band the music ... and someone is trying to teach you how to do it all,” Zambri said.

From having music store workers assume she plays acoustic, not electric, to walking off stage and being told what she should wear when she performs, Zambri had countless anecdotes to share. “The majority of Facebook messages I get after I release a music video will be from random men saying: ‘Do you know that you’re really sexy?’” she said.

While she and her female musician friends have plenty of war stories to swap, she is thankful for the opportunities afforded to her generation compared to those before hers.

Hopper, who has worked in the industry for more than 20 years and published her most recent book in May, does believe things are improving and was encouraged by how quickly the discussion was shared around the globe. By Wednesday morning, it had been translated in Spanish and was making the rounds in the music circles in Spain. “There is widespread dialogue in a way that wasn’t there 10 years ago - a lot of it by social media,” Hopper said.

“If music is truly your life, whether music sets you free from the rest of your life or if music is your calling, as much as anything can be, to get here and have to prove yourself over and over again, it is really dispiriting. It can really take the joy out of it,” Hopper said.

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