

KEEP IT  
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MAKE IT  
FAST!

AN APPROACH  
TO UNDERGROUND  
MUSIC SCENES (VOL. 4)  
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***Keep it Simple, Make it Fast!***

An approach to underground music scenes (vol. 4)

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## 9.4 Rock in high heels: A look through the women's role in Portuguese rock music

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**A b s t r a c t**

Traditionally rock music universe in our societies has been linked to men. In other words, many people still think about rock musicians, journalists, music critics, and many other music professionals as men. Some individuals even though a woman making rock music for a living was something weird or even disrespectful. This scenario still happens today all over the world and Portugal is no exception to that. However, we can't talk about the history of rock'n'roll music without mention the contribution of women. Although just a few, in the beginning, women have been leaving a growing mark in world's rock music and are becoming more independent musically. Because of all this, it's very important to think over and discuss the gender issues in Portuguese rock music and look at women's role in this sphere.

**Keywords:** *Gender, rock music, Portuguese music, sensation-seeking, substance abuse.*



<sup>239</sup> For more information about media representation of female MCs, see Libardi (2016).

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## 1. Starter

As we may know, one of the most exciting social developments that took place almost all over the world at the end of the 1950s/beginning of the 1960s, with more evidence in The Anglo-Saxon world was the emergence of rock music as a (sub)culture. And, according to Whiteley (1997, p. xiii) “the genesis of popular music as a field of study has curious parallels with the emergence of rock itself”. At that time this emergence occurred, almost every young man particularly in the United States and in The United Kingdom became fascinated with the rock’n’roll’s rhythm, instruments and lifestyle, maybe because “(...) rock and roll music were performed exclusively by men” (Harding & Nett, 1984, p. 63). Following this idea, Frith (1981) and McRobbie (1981) assumed that rock’n’roll (sub)culture wasn’t the right spot to look for female participants, particularly in the rock’s production field. According to Simon Frith (1981), one of the reasons that justify this female exclusion from the rock music scene was its bohemian culture, more suitable for men in those years than for women. “Rock was a place for male friendship in a resistive, unregulated life-style, where woman represented unwelcome demands for ‘routine living’, for the provision of money, for food and rent” (Gottlieb & Wald, 1994, p. 257). Moreover, rock music as a (sub)culture has developed itself within some male features, as McRobbie (1981) told us, while she talked about motorbikes or big and heavy musical equipment. “For example, in rock performances, musicians are aggressive, dominating, boastful and in control; the music is loud and rhythmically insistent; and the lyrics are assertive and arrogant” (Larsen, 2007, p. 6). Still, on this topic, we can refer to the typical social interaction which occurs between rock’s stakeholders is predominantly dominated by male’s language, such as “(...) referring to each other by nicknames; using technical and in-house jargon; and sharing the jokes, myths, and hype that surround the bands on the scene (Larsen, 2007, p. 6). So, considering these situations, we can say that women suffered brutal social restrictions, which put them directly linked to housework, to male domination and to restricted independence.

(...) because of patriarchal restrictions, the youth cultures of girls historically have been defined by very different parameters from those of boys. As a result of this second circumstance, girls may have different access to the expression of, or different ways of expressing, nascent teenage sexuality and rebellion against parental (that is, patriarchal) control (...) (Gottlieb, 1994, p. 252).

Besides the social restrictions on girls and the fact that male adolescence and deviance are often perceived to go hand-in-hand (Griffin, 1985; Reddington, 2007), the women’s strong domestic role or their conditioned access to the places where rock as a (sub)culture acts, such as clubs, bars or in the street, make it exclusive for men participation. According to Gottlieb (1994), the street unfolds itself in a dangerous threat to girls and women, because they can easily be subject of male heckling, harassment or assault. In this discussion, it’s important to remember that women have historically been on the street playing as prostitutes. So, the first female participation’s steps in the rock (sub) culture took in their personal spaces, often in their bedrooms. So, as stated by Bayton (1997), women in rock (sub)culture has been consumers, rather than producers, which means that they have been treated specially as fans. Added to this, women in rock beyond being fans, they were seen as musician’s girlfriends, groupies or playing some secondary role, such as backup singers as well. And in some circumstances when we could find only a few of them as musicians were instrumentalists, they often played keyboards. “Whilst women

folk singer-songwriters have played the acoustic guitar, the electric guitar (surely the instrument which most epitomizes 'rock') has been left in the hands of the boys" (Bayton, 1997, p. 37). Yet, about women as groupies, Larsen (2007) says that this kind of labeling reduces the women's experience in rock (sub)culture to a singular sex interest and drives away the idea of women as a prolific participant. "This is in large part because creativity, creative work and creative identities are constructed in such a way that women are marginalized or even excluded" (Larsen, 2007, p. 398). Thus, men have always been in charge in this scene and they have been seen as rock consumers more than women, who often have been seen as mainstream pop consumers.

Harding & Nett (1984) in their debate about the women's role in the rock music industry and literature claimed that rock music's enterprise is almost mastered exclusively by men and that it covers different professional departments like the recording industry, broadcasting industry or the rock audience itself. As expected in this scenario, few women hold executive positions and even less work as producers. "In the other positions too, including managers/financiers, recording engineers, scouts, mixers and roadies, men hold sway almost without exception" (Harding & Nett, 1984, p. 62). So, we can say that men are responsible for what has been played on the radio. Thus, as Frith & McRobbie (2005) say, the creative roles are still held by men and this happens not just in the music or rock music sphere, that matters to us in this paper, but also in the production of mass culture as a whole (Huysen, 1986). "Even the creative and cultural products that are produced and/or consumed by females are valued less and placed further down the cultural hierarchy than those of their male counterparts (...)" (Larsen, 2007, p. 401). Therefore, we can say that men are the rule and women are the exception.

*About the female presence in the subcultures field, Weller (2005) assumed that, in the academic literature production that exists - both in the work on youth and in the feminist studies - there is a gap regarding the participation of women in subcultures. Much of the analysis on clothing, music preferences or body aesthetics was mostly developed from, observations, surveys, and interviews with men (Guerra, Gelain & Moreira, 2017, p. 16).*

Similarly, Harding & Nett (1984) & Reddington (2007) advocated that the women's place in popular music has been declined in the literature and the documentation available about the few female rock protagonists are very poor and stereotyped.

*Very little seems to have been written about the role of girls in youth cultural groupings. They are absent from the classic subcultural ethnographic studies, the pop histories, the personal accounts and the journalistic surveys of the field. ... The objective and popular image of a subculture is likely to be one which emphasises male membership, male focal concerns and masculine values (McRobbie, 2000, p. 12).*

The same 'women-excluded' situation happened in Portugal, a small country where every sign of freshness arrived much time later than in the Anglo-Saxon countries and the conservatism mentalities were much bigger. So, in this paper, we tried to look briefly to the main transformations that happened in the international rock music scene in favor of women active participation and how they reverberated at the Portuguese rock as well. In terms of methodology, to write this paper we used documentary analysis and secondary data.

## 2. The Portuguese scene

Portuguese political democracy is just 45 years old, which means that we lived in a dictatorship until 1974. "In the case of the dictatorship in Portugal, there was a policy of government until the 1960s to remain in a certain isolation, (...)" (Fiuza, 2015, p. 59). During this prevalence of isolation, the Portuguese dictator, António Salazar, appealed to patriotism using verbal expressions, such as calling our isolation as "proudly alone" or appealing to values as "God, homeland and family" and doing contests about the most Portuguese village in Portugal to intensify our patriotism. So, looking at that period, we can say that "Portugal is always thought of as a country deeply linked to the traditional forms and manifestations of its culture" (Monteiro, 2008, p. 2). Clearly, despite Portugal was a secular state, during the dictatorship this country was and still is very devoted to the Christian religion, the main religion in the Portuguese territory till today<sup>241</sup>. Therefore, during the authoritarian period, when something in the Portuguese individuals' everyday lives escaped the political regime assumptions or the Christian's premises, it was hardly accepted by the public power or even not accepted at all in some cases.

All this obviously removed the country from the explosion of rock (sub) culture and from any other cultural products or foreign artistic expressions. The fascist youths, such as the *Mocidade Portuguesa*, so resistant to new customs in the 1960s, were equally untouched by the language and behavior inherent in rock music (Fiuza, 2015, p. 59).

According to Fiuza (2015) since rock as a (sub)culture was highly connected to a big change in the conservative consuetudes, and had a close relationship with the hippie movement, took the authoritarian regime trying to fight these new cultural and social practices in Portugal. However, rock music was able to little by little penetrate the Portuguese society or, rather, the young men's society at first. Just like it happened at the beginning of rock music in the Anglo-Saxon world, in Portugal women were also placed on the sidelines of this (sub)culture in the beginning. "(...) the concern with women's moral behavior may have contributed to a relative female absence in rock and roll and Portuguese rock from the 1960s and 1970s" (Fiuza, 2015, p. 60). The reasons for this female exclusion from the Portuguese rock scene were basically the same lived from the Anglo-Saxon's women. As we lived in a dictatorship, both women and man had no freedom of thought or expression and our society was strictly conservative and sexist, particularly in what concerned the women's role. Women should follow their domestic path and most of them weren't allowed to study more than the elementary school. The news and other types of information from abroad arrived long after Portugal. And, sometimes they didn't arrive at all and contact with other countries cultural lifestyles was highly limited. "It was part of the cultural policy of this time, the affirmation

<sup>241</sup>Bullivant, S. (2018). Europe's Young Adults and Religion: Findings from the European Social Survey (2014-16) to inform the 2018 Synod of Bishops. London: Benedict XVI Centre for Religion and Society.

of a supposed 'Portuguese identity' that should reinforce the singularity of Portugal over the other nations" (Monteiro, 2008, p. 5).

The censorship was very severe with the information spread by the national media, which led some people to basically seek to listen to foreign radios in secret. Thus, the blocking of information flow developed by the Salazarist regime and the absence of effective communication channels only contributed to these hidden practices (Monteiro, 2008). Moreover, as Andrade (2015) concluded, access to rock music was predominantly made through the importation of foreign records, the listening of radio programs and radio stations devoted to the issuance of this music, and the purchase of local recordings. In short, besides the socio-historical restrictions of the country, the distance of women from the rock (sub)culture was also due to her devotion to love and marriage, as the Christian religion ordered, instead of the idea of occasional sex and flirting from men, who were more open to this kind of behaviors. "(...) women ('girls', that is) are reminded that if life on earth is to continue they must love their man and gently (...)" (Harding & Nett, 1984, p. 66). Also, women was thought to be physically weak and not strong enough to carry the musical equipment and the violence and aggressive of men during the performances were not thought to be suitable for female performers.

***It is difficult to stay 'feminine' in a rock band precisely because 'femininity' is an artifice: it is assumed that women do not sweat, that their noses do not go red and shiny, and that their hair stays in place. (...) In contrast, for young men playing guitar in a band directly enhances their masculinity***  
(Bayton, 1997, p. 40).

This all-men scenario in rock (sub)culture did not last long because there were some national and international transformations, which helped open the door to women in rock music.

### **2.1. Ch-ch-ch-ch-changes**

Besides the great significance of 1960s rock artists' such as Janis Joplin, Joan Baez or Grace Slick (Jefferson Airplane), the real acceptance of women in rock (sub)culture just took place with the emergence of punk rock and its association between love/romance and popular music. "Women punk rockers emerged out of a decade of male rock experiments with gender, such as those of Gary Glitter or David Bowie" (Gottlieb, & Wald, 1994, p. 258). As we may know, the 1970s were a decade strongly marked by the growing of androgyny and gender ambiguity in rock's performers and performances. In this sense, at that time we started talking about "(...) transvestism a[s] 'sign' that 'socially-constructed gender roles may be reshuffled, and that no one with the divine spark need be relegated forever to single sex'"(Whiteley, 2007, p. xvi). So, in the musical subgenre called glam-rock, the male musicians used to wear make-up, glitter, sequins, high heels, and peculiar clothes.

The male gender bending of seventies glam-rock forms an important node in this history: breaking with the heterosexual romance paradigm of Elvis or the early Beatles, the glam-rocker elevated the erotics of performance to a high narcissism (...) This moment celebrated sexual deviance and connected it to the rock 'n' roll values of teenage rebellion and transcendent experience (Gottlieb & Wald, 1994, p. 258).

In the glam-rock form of heavy metal, particularly, the male musicians used to have long volumes hair as well as very theatrical performances on stage. "Cross-dressing, in contrast to understated dressing on stage, has become 'a transcendent expression of human potentiality'" (Whiteley, 2007, p. xvi).

Another significant change in rock music that helped to shape de (sub) culture and open it to female participants relates to the erotic performances of some male rock artists. "Two touchstones of white, male, rock performance, Elvis Presley and Mick Jagger, both created excitement in their performances by making sexuality explicit, in hip and lip movements which were uncomfortably unmasculine" (Gottlieb & Wald, 1994, p. 259). In fact, according to Whiteley (2007), the performing styles of stars like Mick Jagger have really opened up new approaches on sexuality by that time. "Jagger's role as singer thus provides an interface between sexual difference (his 'real' maleness, the androgynous performer) and the content of the song" (*Ibidem*, p. xxi).

And last but not least, the establishment of music videos with MTV was crucial to women rockers, once it provided a great space for a well-cared image and a truly emotive performance, commonly associated with females.

If MTV provided multiple images of women rockers (...) punk's staging of defiance and impropriety allowed female punk performers to negotiate the paradox of femininity on the rock stage by enacting transgressive forms of femininity, for instance, in frighteningly unconventional hair, clothing styles and stage activities (Gottlieb & Wald, 1994, p. 260).

So, the development of punk rock and the spreading of its concepts were very significant for the acceptance of women, because it made the apology of gender equality and fought social patterns, conservatism, and unfair social rules. "During the Pistols era, women were out there playing with the men, taking us on in equal terms ... It wasn't combative, but compatible" (Lydon, 1995, p. 378). Thus, these transformations happened gradually in the international scene, and they took a while to arrive in Portugal.

## **2.2. Portuguese rock boom**

After the collapse of the dictatorship in 1974, the Portuguese people took a while to assimilate all the outcomes that it brought to the country. The main outcomes were related to the establishment of a democracy and to the freedom that came with it. So, this new kind of society was totally new for the Portuguese individuals, and there followed a period in which the:

*(...) political crisis is almost permanent, by instability, by a high degree of conflict, by the 'normalization' of the democracy and the market by gradually undoing revolutionary constitutional arrangements and even consequences of recessions and external economic crises* (Barreto, 1996, p. 39).

Thus, just after this adjustment period, we were able to see repercussions in people's everyday life and leisure. The cultural experiences and the musical experiences, in particular, suffered a boom soon at the beginning of the 1980s.

*The beginning of the 1980s marked the 'boom of Portuguese rock', as a whole series of profound transformations within this cultural industry*

***occurred, enhancing its viability and substantiating pop-rock industry as a complex constellation of labels, media, products (LPs, tapes, magazines, newspapers) and social agents (musicians, producers, journalists, critics, radio announcers, DJs, record shops, etc.)*** (Guerra, 2015, p. 619).

In general, only in the 1980s, it was created a real Portuguese music industry with a structure able of dealing with this boom of rock bands and artists, full of talent, energy, and things to say. According to Guerra (2015), this decade approached Portugal to the European standards (with the accession to the European Community in 1985), and also to the whole world once we started to have access to new technical innovations, better musical instruments and equipment, a growing recording market, and a greater media interest in music and cultural activities in general. All these improvements allowed not only an incentive to the professionalization of artists and bands, but also to the admission and acknowledgment of women in the Portuguese rock scene since they became more independent, educated and confident with the end of the dictatorship. "The portrait of the young woman shifts from insecurity to exuberance (...)" (Schmidt, 1985, p. 1063). In addition female workers have progressively entered the labor market, the feminist movements and the second feminist wave, in particular, have also obviously contributed to these changes in woman's life and in their search for equality. "(...) this clear division of the space defined by the gender found a contradiction in the emergent capitalist structure of the country brought by the Revolution and the democracy" (Rodrigues, 1997, p. 84). At this time, Portuguese woman changed the way they saw the traditional family, dating or marriage, and started to have their own leisure time to fill it with cultural activities such as music, cinema or women's magazines. As stated by Rodrigues (1983) some of these women didn't even care about future marriage or chastity before the marriage of their daughters.

***(...) a new path of development was adopted in which women were to play a fundamental role. As a result, women entered the labor market began to participate in political and social life and have enjoyed a growing presence in educational systems that have been extended and restructured in order to overcome the shortcomings that continue to hamper the skills of the overall Portuguese population*** (Conde et al, 2003, p. 262).

It was in this auspicious period for the music industry as a whole that we start to see women assuming leadership roles in rock bands and as solo artists. To Clawson, this latest scenario helped to "provide [women] with new opportunities and help legitimate their presence in a male-dominated site of artistic production" (Clawson, 1999, p. 151). As a rock band member, the female participants weren't just instrumentalists, but vocalists as well. For examples, we had the Portuguese band *Roquívários* formed in 1981 with a girl doing vocals and playing bass; another band called *Rádio Macau* and formed in 1983 had a girl as a frontwoman named Xana. "[Xana] wanted to be a scientist and an astronaut, but at the age of 18 she recorded her first record and became a

true rock star.” (Mendonça *et al*, 2016, n/p). As solo artists, we should mention Lena d'Água, a great singer who started her career in the 1970s doing back vocals in a rock band and finished being one of the most important women in Portuguese rock history; “[Lena d'Água] was one of the biggest stars of the Portuguese rock boom, a sex symbol of a pop generation that in the 80s tuned in with our language and our audience” (Abreu, 2017, n/p); and Adelaide Ferreira who was a big name in Portuguese rock when she released the album *Amantes e Mortais* that was later considered the best Portuguese hard rock album best ever. A very significant event still in this decade was the emergence of one of the first girl group in Europe called *Doce*. Four young ladies composed this pop/rock group and they were very successful not just in Portugal, but also in Spain, France, EUA or Philippines. They even had some songs in the English language. Their particularity was due, in essence, to their extravagant clothing and appealing choreography on stage.

***The Doce were women with an aggressive posture. They were not lyrics that I could write to other singers. It had to have a sensual load because the group lived on it in terms of image and music. The Doce was a very special project, for me the most successful pop project in Portugal*** (Brito, 2014, n/p).

At the same time, Portuguese women began to value their own professional careers and to have more active and creative roles in the business market. “Signs of such change include marked feminization processes in the artistic and teaching worlds (including areas of serious music), with more women present in the cultural labor markets “(Conde, *et al*, 2003, p. 318). In rock music subculture, in particular, the number of female participants as musicians or as fans have been growing little by little, and also the attitudes expressed in their music is changing. As claimed by Gottlieb & Wald (1994) the recognition of the growing explosion of all-women bands or individual women artists were due to media interest and cover, the proliferation of female instrumentalists or women singing about “girl’s stuff”.

Thus, since the 1980s that the participation of women in the rock music industry has been growing meaningfully and we expect to see a gender balance in the near future.

### **3. Some final remarks**

Portugal lived 40 years of a dictatorship and it was very significant for the posterior development of the country in all social fields, both for men and women. All the individuals were subjects to a strong political police and censorship action, who punish anyone who did not follow the State’s rules. There was an atmosphere of fear, and since some man could found some ways to escape this pressure, for women, in particular, it was a very hard time, once they were more limited in their actions due to their domestic duties. So, when the authoritarian regime collapsed, Portugal became almost a new country, because the ulterior outcomes of that event were very violent for the Portuguese conservative society of the time.

In the first half of the 1980s during the called “Portuguese rock boom”, the cultural, artistic and musical scenario changed drastically. At that time,

we started to have a support structure for different kinds of artists and art fans, meaning public spaces for exhibitions or concerts, better electric infrastructures, new clubs and pubs with modern music and ornamentation, more varied clothing stores, more music stores, etc. When it comes to music and rock, in particular, there was an explosion of bands who tried to follow what happened and was still happening abroad, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world. And, as it occurred in those countries, the Portuguese rock (sub)culture welcomed female participants both to be fans and protagonists as well, after a long time of exclusion. But, this happened very gradually as Portuguese society itself was evolving.

However, despite this open space given to women and the growing number of female artists in rock music, this is still a male-dominated field. First, women are still underrepresented in certain spheres of the art world as a hole and they are still often the men who occupy the positions of leadership in most cases. So, women keep facing more obstacles to achieve professional high roles than men. When we look at our music industry, we still see male faces leading the bigger companies. Second, some innate features of women related to building a family, such as pregnancy, motherhood or breastfeed may break their professional career at some level and make it unfeasible some projects or roles. And third, the Portuguese society is still conservative, devoted to the Christian religion and keep glorifying the femininity on women. We still face many stereotypes related to everything that goes against the norms, especially in suburban areas.

It's true that female participation in Portuguese rock music as a whole is growing and we expect it will keep growing, but in general women face more obstacles than men to keep a job in the rock music industry. Even when we look at rock artists or musical groups with long careers in Portugal, very few women are able to stay active for decades. And, this is a reality that still happens not just in Portugal, but a little by many other countries, because changing mindsets is something that is done over time. It is, therefore, necessary to change not only male but also female mentalities, because it is often the woman herself who has stereotypes about her own social role. Still, some elements of Portuguese society still continue to have conservative and retrograde thinking in relation to the role of women and the reputation of rock music, which also makes it difficult for women to stay in this sector.

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