

Lilith Fair: Feminist Practice or Feminism Commodified?

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Abstract: This case study explores the formation and significance of Lilith Fair, an all-women touring music festival established by singer-songwriter Sarah McLachlan in 1997. When the festival initially toured from 1997-1999, it not only proved to be commercially successful, it provided a much-needed sense of community for women concertgoers and musicians. When McLachlan resurrected the tour as "Lilith" in 2010, however, audiences responded much differently than they had in the 1990s. The following case considers the cultural and historical circumstances which made Lilith Fair a success in the 1990s and contemplates why the 2010 Lilith may not have been as relevant or impactful in a new age of feminism.

Introduction

On a Sunday morning in March of 2011, Sarah McLachlan awaited her interview with Canada's largest-circulation national newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*. Almost a year earlier, the Canadian-born singer-songwriter had kicked off Lilith, the re-branded, re-imagined revival of her brainchild, the all-women touring music festival Lilith Fair. Now, after months of touring and performing with other female musicians, McLachlan was about to announce whether or not she would bring Lilith back for the upcoming summer.

In 1997 when McLachlan founded Lilith Fair with her then-manager Terry McBride, Lilith Fair became the top-grossing touring music festival of the summer. Billed as "a Celebration of Women in Music," Lilith Fair featured prominent female artists like Sheryl Crow, Tracy Chapman, Fiona Apple, and McLachlan herself, as well as up-and-coming acts like Jewel and Dido. This all-female lineup provided an alternative to male-dominated tours like Lollapalooza and Ozzfest, attracting many women—and even some men—to Lilith Fair's sense of a female space. Additionally, by donating one dollar of every ticket sold to women's organizations and by including a "village area" with booths for vendors and nonprofits at each show, Lilith Fair distinguished itself not only as a music festival for women, but a socially engaged enterprise that helped women, as well.

Lilith Fair's 1997 tour stopped in thirty-five cities across the United States and Canada, and after successful ticket sales and sold-out dates, McLachlan brought Lilith Fair back in 1998 and 1999. Then, before Lilith Fair's 1999 tour, McLachlan announced that after the year's scheduled performances, the festival would go on an indefinite hiatus. McLachlan cited many of the founders' desires to start families as a main reason for Lilith Fair's postponement: "We're all well into our thirties now and we decided we wanted to have babies," McLachlan announced at a press conference. "This will be the last year for a good, long while" (Freydkin 1999). Knowing that she did not have much more time to have children, McLachlan put Lilith Fair to rest with a heavy heart. Many Lilith Fair fans began to doubt that the festival would ever return.

Then, in 2010, McLachlan announced that Lilith Fair would tour again. This time, McLachlan and McBride would rebrand the tour as "Lilith," hoping to appeal to a new demographic of female festivalgoers. In addition, McBride responded to criticism of Lilith Fair's

lack of diversity by ensuring that Lilith 2010's lineup would provide its audience with a wider range of artists and musical styles. "I made sure there wasn't one category of music missing from [Lilith]—Latin, country, rock, dance, indie, pop, heritage and urban," McBride told *Maclean's* in May of 2010 (Iannacci 2010). With scheduled headliners like Kelly Clarkson, Cat Power, Mary J. Blige, Selena Gomez, and Ke\$ha, among others, Lilith 2010 promised to be a more diverse and intersectional reincarnation of its 1990s predecessor.

But if fans and the media had expected Lilith 2010 to be a roaring return, its eventual outcome would have sounded more like a whisper. By July 2, 2010, Lilith cancelled ten of its thirty-six tour dates after low ticket sales. Shortly after, Kelly Clarkson announced that she would be skipping her Lilith performances to work on her album and Selena Gomez, Carly Simon, Queen Latifah, The Go-Gos, and Norah Jones dropped out, as well. In addition, some of the artists that Lilith had announced as a part of its original lineup, like Rihanna, were inexplicably absent from the festival. As McLachlan and McBride vacillated on whether or not to cancel more dates, they contacted fans through social media, asking them to check Lilith's website to stay updated on any changes.

Although some media outlets like *Rolling Stone* remarked that Lilith's struggles were simply a byproduct of a bad economy where fewer people were spending money on entertainment, others began to wonder whether Lilith's low-ticket sales were indicative of a lack of relevance. In an interview with *National Public Radio*, Ann Powers, an influential music critic and a self-declared feminist, described Lilith's dilemma as twofold: "We are in a different time," Powers remarked. "On the one hand, there are many, many more visible women at the top of the mainstream pop scene. On the other hand, I think it's arguable that there's less [gender] consciousness" (Pellegrinelli 2010a). Powers' comments reflected many critics' idea that between 1997 and 2010, a shift had occurred in women's relationship to Lilith.

Considering women's advancement in popular music since the 1990s, did women in 2010 feel that an event like Lilith was no longer necessary? Or, were changes in women's relationship with feminism responsible for the low-ticket sales? With these questions in mind, McLachlan contemplated whether or not Lilith should tour again in 2011.

Background: Sexism and the Music Industry

In the late 1990s, McLachlan was already a well-established artist with three commercially successful full-length albums. Despite her growing popularity, McLachlan struggled to get her music on the radio. "When my album *Fumbling Towards Ecstasy* came out, a lot of radio stations said they couldn't play me because they already had another [female] singer-songwriter on their playlist," McLachlan recalls. "They were saying, 'Go away, we've added our token female this week'" (Farley and Thigpen 1997).

Galvanized to challenge this blatant sexism, McLachlan organized a small tour featuring herself and another female performer, Paula Cole, in 1996. The shows were well-attended, proving wrong many music promoters' idea that an all-female bill could not be commercially successful. McLachlan's experiences at these shows combined with her realization that all of the popular summer concert series were overwhelmingly male roused her interest in a large, all-female touring music festival Lilith Fair had been born.

The fateful incidents that inspired McLachlan to create Lilith Fair, though unique to her experience as an artist, are symptomatic of the larger struggles that women in the music industry have historically faced. Since the advent of American popular music in the mid-nineteenth century, women have had to defend their role as artists and musicians solely because they inhabit a female body. Many living in post-Civil War America considered music-making to be a male

arena and, consequently, viewed women who wished to sing or play instruments as unfeminine or even immoral and lascivious. In other words, many people did not take female musicians seriously because, most simply, they were not men.

Although perceptions about female musicians would change as women began to gain social equality, patriarchal structures within American society have created a paradigm in which women who wish to make music must overcome a very different set of obstacles than men who wish to do the same. One of the largest issues that women in the music industry have had to overcome is the idea that they must be physically attractive to gain commercial success as artists. In the 1950s, record label executives used the fact that a growing number of American households were buying televisions to reinforce this notion and signed women who they thought would be appealing to television viewers (Gaar 1992). This tactic barred many talented female artists from breaking into the music industry and, more importantly, revealed that for women, meeting the hegemonic standards of beauty was more important than the work they could produce.

The notion that women in music are no more than objects purposed for the male gaze has manifested in other ways. In 1991, an article in the *Los Angeles Times* investigated the rampant sexual harassment in the American music industry. Historian Gillian Gaar explains that this article shed light on the “put up or shut up bind” that women who experience sexual harassment face: “[Female victims of sexual harassment are] forced to either learn to adjust to an uncomfortable situation, or file suit knowing that whatever the outcome of the case, they will be unlikely to get a job working in the music industry again,” Gaar writes. “As a result, women working in the industry have been driven to create an informal grapevine to pass on information about companies deemed ‘safe havens’ from sexual harassment” (Gaar 1992). Even though many female musicians and women working in other areas of the music industry face degrading situations and uncomfortable work environments, they often choose to ignore or minimize these experiences because they are afraid of losing their livelihoods. These women’s reactions are a testament to the overwhelmingly male culture of the music industry and the way this culture has further positioned female musicians as “the other.”

But perhaps the most significant way sexism has impacted women in the music industry is through its tokenization of female artists. “When given the opportunity, women performers have proved again and again that they can sell records, but doubts about the ability of women artists to make records that people will actually want to buy remain,” Gaar explains. “[E]ven today, managers relate that they still have trouble finding a record deal with companies who continue to claim, ‘But we already have a girl singer’” (Gaar 1992). Gaar’s commentary illustrates the ways the music industry assumes not only that each female artist’s product is the same, but that the public is less interested in this product than that of a male artist. Sarah McLachlan’s realization of the ways these assumptions created unfair and unnecessary competition among female artists catalyzed the formation of Lilith Fair.

Cultural Feminism and the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival

The idea for a music festival with an all-female lineup, however, did not originate with McLachlan. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, some Second Wave feminists began to endorse “cultural feminism,” the notion that women can bring about social change through cultural activities. These women argued that participating in “women’s culture” including “feminist bookstores and presses, women’s music companies and concerts, and other feminist businesses” (Staggenborg, Eder and Sudderth 1993-1994) was just as important in contributing to feminist activism or political organizing. Cultural feminism allowed for the establishment of the first women’s music festivals and initiated conversation about these festivals’ feminist potential. One

of the most influential of these early festivals that still survives today is the Michigan Womyn's¹ Music Festival, dubbed "Michfest" or simply "Michigan." Though primarily a space for women's music, Michfest seeks to do more than just provide female musicians with an opportunity to perform to a larger audience and to operate outside the confines of the male-dominated music industry—it attempts to create an environment completely devoid of male influences. Since its inception in 1976, Michfest has barred men from attending or performing at the festival. Women organize and run every aspect of the event, from food service and childcare to audiovisual operations and stage tech. Although many people, including some feminists, have criticized Michfest for its separationist stance, the idea of a safe, female-centric space in which women can appreciate and celebrate women's culture continues to attract patrons to the festival each year.

In addition to performances, Michfest stages workshops and meetings throughout the weekend of the festival. The inclusion of workshops for discussing the varied experiences and oppressions women face was common to women's music festivals throughout the 1970s and 1980s and helped situate these events as a form of feminist practice. Liz Quinn, a writer for the radical feminist publication *Off Our Backs*, described how the workshops connected Michfest to the larger radical feminist movement:

Radical feminism has encouraged women to name their experience, and Michigan also does this in a number of ways. Workshops and meetings are set up on a variety of topics: self-nurturing, civil disobedience, dyslexia, preventing child sexual abuse, numerology, aging parents, martial arts, networking, sports, spirituality, health care, sexuality, and the peace movement are just some of the workshop topics offered this year. Like radical feminism, Michigan attempts to re-conceptualize reality according to women's viewpoints. This creates a change of attitude and consciousness which is hard to leave behind when the festival ends. In fact, one is changed by fully experiencing Michigan--one cannot totally wrench one's consciousness back to its pre-Festival state (1984).

Quinn's experience at Michfest highlights the transformational possibilities of attending a women's music festival. Similarly, in their study of another 1970s-established women's music festival, the National Women's Music Festival held annually at Indiana University, Staggenborg, Eder and Sudderth explained that attending the festival helped participants feel more empowered about the contributions women can make to society:

As a result of viewing women more positively, feeling they could influence larger social processes, and feeling more integrated as individuals, women experienced a greater degree of effectiveness in their attempts to produce social change. For some women, the main purpose of attending the festival was to enhance their personal strength so they could be more effective in political involvements. For others, the greater sense of empowerment experienced there led to greater awareness of their own potential for influencing social change as well as more awareness of routes through which they could become more politically active (1993-1994).

By emphasizing and legitimizing women's role in cultural production, women's music festivals

¹ "Womyn" is one of the many alternative spellings for "women" that some feminists prefer to use instead of the traditional spelling. By using "womyn," "womon" (singular) or "wimmin" (plural), these women symbolically remove "man" and "men" from "woman" and "women," viewing the changed spelling as an act of female independence and resistance against the roles of women in a male-dominated society.

encouraged attendees to realize the ways they could make a difference in the world.

Although these early women's music festivals were often positive consciousness-raising experiences for the women that attended them, many Americans outside of feminist circles criticized them for their insularity. The fact that many of these festivals, including Michfest, helped promote lesbian artists and drew many lesbian attendees, and that male festivalgoers were not allowed entry, stigmatized women's music festivals as gatherings for male-bashing. This stigma was so pervasive that many people could not say the phrase "women's music" without conjuring a negative response from others. As the stereotype of the bra-burning, male-hating—yet simultaneously masculine—"feminazi" grew in popularity, some feminists began to distance themselves from anything that might associate them with this image, including women's music festivals. It would take a new generation of feminists to help lessen the stigma of women's music and allow for an all-female music festival to move away from the fringe of American music-making.

Third Wave Feminism and Riot Grrrl

Lilith fair's overwhelmingly positive reception in the late 1990s is indebted to the changes in feminist theory and practice that occurred toward the end of the twentieth century. This "Third Wave" grew out of young women's critiques of the goals and methods of earlier feminist movements and reinforced the idea that issues faced by women living in the nineties were different than those faced by women of previous generations. "The evolution of the 'third wave' was a direct response by young women to the lack of resonance they felt with older women's feminism," Amber Shipley explains. "In particular, younger feminists diverged from the older cohort around issues like race, sexuality, victimhood, and cultural politics" (Shipley 2006). The Third Wave demonstrated the need for a brand of feminism that spoke to the ways intersectionality affected females while validating the experiences of young women and girls.

Borrowing from cultural feminism, the Third Wave emphasized the importance of culture, especially popular culture, as a medium to promote social change. Riot Grrrl, an interdisciplinary feminist movement that began in the early 1990s, made a significant impact on the ways women related to music. Rooted in the experiences of female punk-rockers from the Pacific Northwest, Riot Grrrl sought to challenge the male-dominated punk scene by creating a feminist community and by starting a dialogue on the ways sexism functioned in the music industry. All-female bands like Bikini Kill and Bratmobile would often employ a "girls to the front" policy by demanding that female audience members be allowed to congregate at the front of the stage. This "girl's only" space common at many Riot Grrrl gigs disrupted the masculinized environment of punk shows and brought attention to the gendered practices and behaviors at concerts.

Riot Grrrl was also important in establishing women's music-making as a feminist process. In addition to writing songs with lyrics that addressed the distinctive oppressions they felt as young women, Riot Grrrls encouraged females to start their own bands. As Kathleen Hanna, the singer for Bikini Kill, writes in a zine² published by the band in 1991, Riot Grrrls believed the reasons women should play music are more about perpetuating social equality than about artistic expression; Hanna cites being "a role model for other girls," reminding "other girls that they aren't alone," and making "fun of and thus disrupt[ing] the powers that be" as motivators for women's involvement in Riot Grrrl (Dougher and Keenan 2012). By ensuring her readers that "[i]t doesn't have to be this intense dramatic self-righteous thing to affect change," Hannah

² "Zines," short for "fanzines," are self-published pieces of literature circulated on a small scale. Many Riot Grrrls wrote zines and used them to create a trans-national network with other women involved in the movement.

summarized one of Riot Grrrl's core ideologies: in a society where women are discouraged from participating in musical production, women who make music are inherently challenging patriarchal structures (Dougher and Keenan 2012).

Although Riot Grrrl was an underground movement, mainstream appropriation helped to disseminate its messages to a wider public. In the mid-1990s, "girl power," a slogan that originated in Riot Grrrl circles, appeared on everything from stickers to notebooks to t-shirts. Additionally, media outlets began to use "grrrl," Riot Grrrl's reinvention of the word "girl" as a non-passive growl, to refer to angry female musicians, even those that were not associated with the movement. While this commodification diluted and simplified many of Riot Grrrl's ideologies, it aided in the creation of a larger social climate in which people other than those attending women's music festivals began to realize that women's contributions to society, especially music, were something to be celebrated. The Riot Grrrls had helped make the idea of women playing music seem cool, even though the messages about which many of these musicians sang challenged sexism and patriarchy. The growing girl-positive pop culture initiated by the Third Wave would be the perfect environment for McLachlan's Lilith Fair to flourish.

From Lilith Fair to Lilith

When Lilith Fair first started touring in the late 1990s, many women, including McLachlan, were making strides within the American Music industry. The growing popularity of "modern adult contemporary," a musical genre characterized by the genre-spanning combination of folk and alternative sound, helped many female singer-songwriters gain prominence and paved the way for an audience that would be receptive to Lilith Fair's lineup. In an interview with *Time* in 1997, McBride explained the significance of the genre to Lilith Fair's success:

The blossoming of modern AC [adult contemporary] was so important. Artists like Sarah, Fiona [Apple] and Jewel have always been at the bottom of [radio] playlists, but about 14 months ago, we started getting some attention. It helped us get the exposure we needed to be able to put on a Lilith (Farley and Thigpen 1997).

As most of the artists on Lilith Fair's lineup were members of this late 1990s cohort of "coffee house pop" musicians, some historians attribute the success of Lilith Fair's initial run to the idea that McLachlan and McBride were providing festivalgoers with a product that was in high demand.

Still, responses from the media, audience members, and musicians involved in Lilith Fair alike expressed that the festival's commercial success was due to much more than good timing or capitalizing on a trend. In their coverage of Lilith Fair's first show in George, Washington, Journalists Christopher Farley and David Thigpen described the concert environment as a "safe, sacred spot":

Here were teenage girls in cutoff jeans and bikini tops, middle-aged moms in baggy T-shirts and running shoes. Here a woman breast-fed her baby during Jewel's set; here fans sat dead-quiet, listening to the lyrics. Here a woman wore a T-shirt marked 'dyke' with a parodic Nike swoosh, while two other women walked comfortably hand in hand. Here a man in a concession-stand line talked excitedly about Sarah McLachlan's songwriting skills (1997).

Like Michfest, Lilith Fair provided a calm, inclusive environment in which festivalgoers could express their individuality and enjoy music—albeit one that included men. The combination of

Lilith Fair's all-female lineup, the nonprofit centered village area and a concert-going experience that one writer explained should be "celebrated as much for its stellar lineups as for its clean bathrooms and placid crowds," provided audience members with an alternative to the aggressive, masculinized ethos of other prominent festivals at the time and the feeling that their attendance at Lilith Fair was helping to create social change (Freydkin 1999).

But even more importantly, Lilith Fair offered female artists a sense of community and camaraderie that the male-dominated music industry has historically failed to provide. By only booking female artists to play Lilith Fair, McLachlan allowed many women the chance they needed to break into the American music scene. This included Eden White, a singer-songwriter who won a nationwide contest to perform at Lilith Fair. "As a result of Lilith Fair, I got signed to a label," White told CNN in 1998. "My CD came out nationally and internationally. Billy Joel came to one of my shows. And all that is the result of meeting and being seen by people at Lilith" (Freydkin 1999). Other up and coming artists who performed at Lilith Fair explained that meeting and interacting with the more seasoned musicians at the festival was an educational experience that they would not have received elsewhere. "Everybody is so helpful and so kind," singer Rebekah said of Lilith Fair 1998. "It's very encouraging for people like us that have so many questions because we don't have a manual or a hand guide" (Freydkin 1998). As much as Lilith Fair was an event for festivalgoers, the shows also gave female artists the tools to navigate the music industry, and a larger sense of solidarity with other women in music.

But if magazine articles in the late 1990s were describing Lilith Fair as "lovely, lively, and long overdue," what had occurred within Lilith's ten-year hiatus that would make media outlets in 2010 question the festival's relevance? Carrie Brownstein, member of the all-female group Sleater-Kinney, suggested that women's gains in the music industry between 1997 and 2010 created an environment in which it seemed a festival like Lilith Fair was no longer necessary. "Part of the reason Sarah McLachlan started Lilith Fair in the first place is that she'd become frustrated with concert promoters and radio stations that refused to feature two female musicians in a row," Brownstein writes. "But clearly, at least on Top 40 radio, that's no longer the case" (Brownstein 2010). Ann Powers provided another explanation for Lilith's low-ticket sales:

We have to remember and always reiterate our values, to say it right out: 'I am a feminist.' Right now, it's not very fashionable. I look at the younger generation of women coming up in their twenties and, for whatever reason, they don't feel like they always have to say those words (Pellegrinelli 2010a).

Almost twenty years after the beginnings of Third Wave Feminism and the Riot Grrrl movement, some critics believed young women were less receptive to Lilith because they were not as connected to feminism as their predecessors.

Interestingly, other critics argued that women in 2010 were not as interested in Lilith because they were dissatisfied with the type of feminism, or even lack of feminism, they believed the festival promoted. "There are still aspects that frustrate the tour's vaguely feminist intents," Maura Johnston, a journalist for *The Village Voice* wrote in 2010. "After all, the only requirement for being a Lilith act is having a female up front—yes, most were instrumentalists as well, but the bulk of the non-singers onstage were dudes. (Hello, male gaze!)" (2010). Although Lilith Fair had always allowed men to attend and invited male instrumentalists to perform if a band had a female lead, it seemed that some Lilith participants would have preferred an environment with less male influences.

Faced with divergent opinions about why Lilith 2010 had not been as commercially

successful as its 1990s predecessor, McLachlan pondered what changes she could make, if any, to improve women's relationships to the music festival.

Epilogue

In March of 2011, Sarah McLachlan announced to Canada's *The Globe and Mail* that Lilith would not tour again that summer. McLachlan explained that while Lilith Fair had been an important event in the late 1990s, she had decided that Lilith was no longer resonant with women in 2010:

[Lilith Fair was] about learning more from our failures than our successes, and it was a beautiful organic event that happened at a point in time when it was really needed. And bringing the same thing back last year really didn't make any sense, in retrospect, without due diligence being done on how women have changed. Because in twelve years, women have changed a lot. Their expectations have changed, the way they view the world has changed, and that was not taken into consideration, which I blame myself for (Lederman 2011).

Although McLachlan had previously stated that Lilith would be back and had anticipated extending the tour to Europe the following summer, she emphasized that the impact Lilith had in the 1990s could not be reproduced in 2010. McLachlan stated that she would try to incorporate Lilith's ideals into her future work, but that her future work would not include organizing another Lilith Fair.

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