

Personal Take IV: Pamela Cole

Acceptable Positions

Did you know that the acoustic guitar was made for women? Well, not exactly *made* for them; more like it was an acceptable instrument in the 1800s for women to play because it was made for accompaniment and to be played at home. The parlor guitar was meant, of course, to be played gently and gracefully and quietly in the parlor.

Fast forward from classical music to the jazz, big band, and country & western genres. Women continued playing acoustic guitars and other “acceptable” feminine instruments such as piano, flute, and other woodwinds. Then, in 1932, G.D. Beauchamp invented the first electric guitar: the Rickenbacker Frying Pan. The electric pickup made guitars louder. In 1951 came the Fender Telecaster and, one year later, the Gibson Les Paul. Now, a person could stand up with their instrument and move around and play even *louder* in public. For most women, this was still unacceptable behavior. But, as the Women’s Movement gained momentum, some women decided to go against the quiet norm. I’m not going to do your homework for you; I’m just going to list a few, and you take a deep dive into the rabbit hole like I had to do. Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, Peggy Jones-Lady Bo, Barbara Lynn, Goldie and the Gingerbreads, Ace of Cups, The Pleasure Seekers, and Fanny are all great starting points.

Fifteen years ago, Leigh Maples and I opened Fanny’s House of Music in Nashville, Tennessee. Nashville, aka Music City, has long been a place where all types of music can be heard, recorded, and enjoyed. The music stores are internationally known, and the musicians are some of the best in the world. Still, there was something missing in the spaces here in “guitar town.” Named after one of the first all-girl bands—Fanny—Fanny’s House of Music is a store whose environment is welcoming and inclusive to all, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, or musical background. In addition to being one of a few female-owned and operated music stores, Fanny’s floor staff is three-quarters women, and the teaching staff is 100 percent female. Our male students or customers will never have reason to assume that a girl can’t play guitar, bass, or drums or be loud. Fanny’s House of Music is more than a music store; it’s a mission.

When Leigh and I started doing research before opening a store, we couldn't find a single manufacturer that was tracking the gender of their customers. It wasn't until 2019 that Fender, one of the largest guitar manufacturers in the world, conducted research on female guitar players. According to their study, "50% of all beginner and aspirational guitar players in the United States are women, and the number of women playing electric guitar has increased over the past decade." The study also found that female guitar players face more barriers and challenges than their male counterparts, including being taken less seriously by music store staff and being subjected to sexist comments and stereotypes. Really?! All they had to do was ask any female musician. "Fender's research highlights the importance of creating more inclusive and welcoming spaces for female guitar players in the music industry." No kidding.

After fifteen years, Fanny's has gained recognition for its innovative approach to the musical instrument community, filling a gap in the market by providing a space that is intentionally designed to promote female musicians. When you walk into Fanny's House of Music, you'll see hanging on the walls myriad photos and posters of women playing their instruments. Some of those women are listed above as part of your homework. Representation matters, and a young girl seeing herself can inspire confidence and acceptance. We remain committed to our mission of creating a space where women and girls can feel empowered to explore their musical interests without fear of judgment or exclusion. If a young girl or her mom have never experienced the "power of loud," we make sure she gets hooked up to an electric guitar, throw on the distortion, and watch the shift that happens. Over and over, we have witnessed a shy, bullied student pick up a bass or guitar and become a more confident person. We hope Fanny's commitment to fostering a diverse and inclusive community of musicians has helped to inspire a new generation of female musicians and music lovers, creating a positive impact in the local music scene and beyond. We believe that music has the power to bring people together and create change in our communities, and we are proud to be a part of that movement here in Nashville.

Playing guitar is still often considered attractive, powerful, and masculine. If you haven't seen the *Barbie* movie, just search for the scene with the Kens playing guitar at their adoring Barbies . . . for four hours! We still see this scenario in our store. But, more and more, we see it becoming acceptable for female musicians to play for *their* significant other . . . or just for themselves. And, so, Fanny's mission continues . . .