

12 Trailblazers, Self-Creators, and Provers: Celebrating Women in Electric Guitar

SUE FOLEY

Introduction

Playing electric blues guitar is extremely competitive. It is part of the tradition. In Austin, Texas, where I started my recording career, that tradition was strong, and the players were fierce. You had to be able to play assertively and aggressively to be heard and to get your point across. By twenty-one, I'd already been on the road for years, coming up through biker bars in the Canadian Prairies and playing one-nighters across the US. I was aware of having to stake my claim, and I was also hyper-aware of being different, of my female-ness. At that time, there were not many women lead guitarists out there, so I always noticed when one came into my sight. I kept track of them as I went along.

In 2001, I began interviewing many of these female guitarists. Over the next decade, I interviewed more than a hundred prominent guitar women. This exercise was quite an education for me personally, as I came to understand the perspectives of my musical peers. I believe that virtually all of my interview subjects also found it therapeutic to articulate their thoughts on their experiences—for many of them, this was the first instance where they were asked to reflect on their journey. This chapter encompasses my own encounters as well as a summary of the perspectives of my interviewees on their time in the music industry and their encounters with the guitar. These are excerpts from my upcoming book, *Guitar Woman*.

Modern guitar women are now more visible as influential players. In 2017, *Guitar Player* magazine declared that women have made a tremendous contribution to guitar culture. In recognition of this influence, *Guitar Player* magazine dedicated one of its fiftieth-anniversary editions to an alphabetical list of the top fifty female players, across time and genre. I was honored to be among those players, and I was gratified in knowing that I had interviewed and researched well over 80 percent of the women still living who were on this list.¹

Additionally, over the past twenty years that I have been studying guitar women, the long-standing number and status of female players has

undergone a significant transformation. As a young girl in love with the guitar, I could name all the female players I knew on one hand. When I began my professional career, the scene started to blossom. These days, each time I refresh my social media feeds, I am inundated with photos and videos of women of all ages, varied backgrounds, musical genres, and cultures, shredding on the guitar. At this point, it no longer seems like a big deal to see a woman really play. I believe we have moved past that. What has kept this project relevant to me is the fact that these changes occurred because of the women who blazed the trails. The path is undoubtedly easier now because of them.

Role Models and Trailblazers

In the late 1930s, three women were among the very first electric guitarists: rockin' gospel singer and guitarist Sister Rosetta Tharpe, a Rock & Roll Hall of Fame member, who is credited with the first rock and roll song ("Strange Things Happening Every Day," 1946) and has a song in the Library of Congress ("Down By The Riverside," 1958);² swing and bebop jazz guitarist Mary Osborne, the only prominent female jazz guitarist from 1940 to 1960; and blues singer and guitarist Memphis Minnie, one of my biggest heroes, who also has a song in the Library of Congress ("Me & My Chauffeur Blues," 1941). Discovering Memphis Minnie was one of the most impactful events of my music career. At barely sixteen years old, I began my lifelong love affair with her and the mythology that shrouded her life.

In 1910, at age thirteen, Minnie began hitchhiking the seventeen miles from her family farm to Memphis to busk on Beale Street. After a few years of this, she spent three years with the Barnum & Bailey Circus working on her stage act. She eventually went back to Memphis, and along with her husband, Kansas Joe McCoy, she started her recording career. Minnie and Kansas Joe moved to Chicago in 1930. They recorded relentlessly until the couple divorced in 1934. By 1938, Minnie was fronting a power trio with her commanding voice and aggressive electric guitar. This was the genesis of modern electric Chicago blues.

Minnie was known to be rough and tough in the bars and on the streets, quick with a knife and a pistol, and even a guitar if she needed to hit you with it. On stage, she was known to go head-to-head with the best of her male counterparts. Big Bill Broonzy tells³ of engaging with Memphis Minnie in the very first guitar-cutting contest in 1933! It was held at 1:30 am in South Side, Chicago, in a large hall filled with black and white spectators. The sidewalk and street outside were crowded with fans

competing for scarce window views of the contest. It was judged by Sleepy John Estes, Tampa Red, and Richard M. Jones. After two songs each, Minnie won the prize of a bottle of whiskey and a bottle of gin. Minnie also had cutting contests with others, such as Jimmy Rogers and Muddy Waters. Minnie always won. Every time.

This story showed me that Minnie embraced all that was involved in being a badass guitar player. She dug her heels in, and she did what the guys were doing. The culture of competitiveness that comes with playing lead guitar has been going on from the start. If you get in the ring, you better be ready to battle. Minnie defined her right to be in the ring decades before any mention of equal rights for women. She did it with skill and grit.

Several of my interview subjects report finding Memphis Minnie later in their careers. Alice Stuart, the only female guitarist to be a member of The Mothers of Invention, describes her discovery of Minnie:

When I started recording for Arhoolie, Chris Strachwitz gave me a bunch of Memphis Minnie's stuff, and I just went crazy. I recorded her song, "In My Girlish Days." I thought when I heard her; she's been around for a while, she did it.
(Alice Stuart)

Slide guitarist Ellen McIlwaine describes how Minnie and others were not available role models:

There was nobody there but me. Memphis Minnie wasn't somebody that anybody talked about. Those women who played blues – like in the '40s – kind of got buried and passed over. I hadn't heard of them until much later. There was nobody else around.
(Ellen McIlwaine)

Influences

Without available role models, how and by whom were prominent female guitarists influenced to begin and sustain careers? Personally, I was drawn to the guitar partly through the influence of my family and by the culture at the time.

The 1970s, when I was a child, was the era of the guitar god. The instrument was woven into the fabric of the culture. My older brothers were guitarists, as was my father. The guitar was a symbol of the power of expression in my father's hands while he strummed traditional Irish folk songs and ballads. Even more, though, the power of the instrument was conveyed through the loud guitar-driven rock and roll that my brothers blasted from their rooms—Led Zeppelin, Jimi Hendrix, The Rolling Stones. As a young girl, I would slip into my oldest brother's room and

gaze at the posters on his wall. There was Jimmy Page in his Merlin suit, his Les Paul extended from his crotch, and Hendrix with his white Stratocaster raised up to the heavens while stadiums of fans looked on, mesmerized. I was a tomboy, and I was barely aware of being different from my brothers. I was also musically inclined, so it seemed completely natural that I would play guitar too.

Most of the women I interviewed were drawn to the guitar through many of the same avenues as their male counterparts. Particularly significant to my interview subjects were live televised performances of popular musicians on Ed Sullivan's prime time Sunday night variety show. This show ran from 1948 to 1971, providing visibility to hundreds of musicians along the way. Suzi Quatro recalls:

I remember distinctly when I was eight years old, The Ed Sullivan Show was on, and Elvis came out, and he did "Don't Be Cruel." . . . I've got to say, I was hypnotized by this guy. Then, he did that thing in "All Shook Up," where he goes, "Uuumm." I felt a sexual thrill, and I couldn't name it. I didn't know what it was. I just knew I'd never felt anything like that before. I always say that was the moment Suzi Quatro was born. I had made up my mind at the age of eight that I was going to be him, and it never occurred to me that he was a guy.

(Suzi Quatro)

Alice Stuart and Barbara Lynn echo Suzy Quatro, describing their introduction to rock and roll:

I remember seeing Elvis Presley for the first time on [*The Ed Sullivan Show*] . . . I never saw any live shows because no one came to our town. It was so great. I just wanted to do that.

(Alice Stuart)

When I was young, I always pretended that I was playing piano on the windowsill, and then I saw Elvis Presley and other guitar players and I thought I would like to play guitar. After seeing Elvis Presley playing, I just knew I was born to play that guitar. So, my mother went out and bought me an Arthur Godfrey ukulele. She worked at a box factory place where they made boxes, and she took her little bit of money and went and bought me a \$9.95 ukulele. I had to be about maybe 9 or 10.

(Barbara Lynn)

Another episode of *The Ed Sullivan Show*, when The Beatles made their American debut, also inspired many women to pick up guitars and start bands.

I saw The Beatles on TV. That was a hell of a shock to my system.

(Jennifer Batten)

Oh, I think I was born to play guitar, coming from our family who's very musical. Then we saw The Beatles on The Ed Sullivan Show, and it was like, Oh my god!

We have to have a band. We have to get guitars now! So, we got our guitars, and we started learning every Beatles song – the guitar chords out of the *Mel Bay's Guitar Chords* book. We just started immediately to try to have a band like The Beatles. (Nancy Wilson)

The night the Beatles were on Ed Sullivan, my parents got my older sister and me out of bed to watch, which of course, I just thought was the coolest thing ever . . . I immediately started asking for guitars. I got a plastic guitar for the first Christmas, and then the second Christmas, I got an actual wood guitar from Sears. Then sometime in the next year, I convinced my parents to buy me a Rickenbacker copy, so my first electric guitar was this very cool Rick copy, and it was just like the one the Beatles had. That was in the fourth grade. (Vicki Peterson, The Bangles)

Self-Creation: Suzi Quatro

I kinda always knew what I was. Let's put it this way: I knew what I wasn't. I didn't fit into any existing mold, and that was scary. (SUZI QUATRO)

Before Joan Jett, Chrissie Hynde, and countless other women donned leather pants and electric guitars, there was Suzi Quatro. Like millions of fans in the 1970s, I first knew Suzi through her character, Leather Tuscadero, on the sitcom *Happy Days*. She entered my consciousness like a freight train at full speed. I did not know I had been waiting for her, but when she appeared, it all made sense. Suzi did not look like the other females I saw in music. She seemed like a down-to-earth, tough girl who could handle herself in a man's world. She dressed in black leather, played the hell out of the bass, and held her own with a group of rough Detroit dudes. It was not until I saw Suzi Quatro that I felt a life playing the guitar could actually be mine. Suzi did not just create a personal identity. She created an archetype—"the rock chick." When I interviewed Suzi several years back, I was struck by her seriousness as a player, her humility, and her outspoken opinions on female musicians. I love how she holds us all accountable to master our instruments.

It was hard all through my life. I never knew where I belonged until I got on stage. I shocked a lot of people. I was playing with a band of guys, and I was in charge. Nobody had seen that before, and I like to think I gave women a voice in rock and roll, which we should have had, but we didn't. . . .

In fact, to this day, I have a real aversion to women who pick up instruments and don't play them properly. That really pisses me off. I think, "What the hell did I bother for?" If you can't play it, don't fucking pick it up! (Suzi Quatro)

Quatro describes her early years in isolation, which spurred her to create something new:

I didn't have a role model, basically. There wasn't anybody for me to model myself on, so I kind of created the serious rock and roll musician model . . . Nobody had it before that. I was aware that I was holding out, actually—not succumbing to becoming like the other girls. I was thinking, oh, my God. What if I don't make it? You know? I was a little bit nervous, but I just had to stick to what I was. . . .

I remember doing my first photo session in the jumpsuit. I was in charge, and my hands were on my hips. I just took the stance naturally. That was my stance. I remember the photographer, he said, "Okay, give me a Suzi Quatro look." I did this look, and I don't know where it came from, but it became the Suzi Quatro look. Don't ask me where it came from 'cause I have no idea. (Suzi Quatro)

When I asked Quatro whether there were any female influences in her early days, she spoke frankly, "No. None."

The Go-Go's bassist, Kathy Valentine, remembers something stirring in her when she saw Suzi Quatro perform for the first time.

When I started playing, there were no women, and when I started playing guitar, I thought, "I'm gonna be the first one." What changed it for me was when I was in England in 1975, and I saw Suzi Quatro on TV. It had never occurred to me that a woman could be a rockstar before I saw her. I knew that women sang, I knew they'd strummed guitars, but I never saw any woman being a rockstar. So, I went from wanting to play acoustic guitar to wanting to be a rockstar. And it was all because of her. (Kathy Valentine)

The Proving Ground

Every time a player walks on stage, they are proving themselves on some level, no matter how unknown or established they are. That is normal and to be expected for males and for females. But when I was starting out, there were so few women lead electric guitar players on the circuit that I was extra sensitive to the attitudes of the audience and, sometimes, of the other musicians beside me on stage. I was slight, petite, and I always looked years younger than my age. No one expected that I was going to rip on guitar, so I would often get suspicious looks, attitudes, and catcalls from the audience like "Show us your tits," "Chick thinks she can play," or some other base remark. As a result, I sometimes overcompensated and acted more aggressively than I needed to. I felt like I had to make a statement. I had to make them see that I was here to really play, and that I was not fucking around. I bought a hundred-watt Fender amp and a hundred-foot guitar

cable, and I would walk through the club playing my solos in everyone's faces. I played behind my head. I played with my teeth and behind my back. I played long, loud solos. I would drown out their catcalls with volume and with balls. At the end of the set, the same rough dudes who had been sneering at me would be lined up wanting to buy me shots.

Many of the women I interviewed spoke of having to prove themselves in some aspect of their careers. Some of the challenges were based on people not expecting them to be able to handle the instrument; others were based around exclusion from radio airplay, or professional competitiveness. Ellen McIlwaine, the Goddess of Slide, speaks forcefully of the pressures of the music business on the young, upcoming female guitarist.

My perspective is that the music business was not particularly accepting of female guitarists. It's like, god, I went through hell for a long time . . . Being a female guitar player doesn't have any restrictions, but other people who use that term seem to think it does. (Ellen McIlwaine)

Ellen started out playing acoustic guitar in Greenwich Village in 1966. Soon she was meeting and jamming with legends such as Jimi Hendrix, Mississippi John Hurt, and Odetta Holmes. Only a few years later, she was signed by Polydor and gained cult status from her solo albums *Honky Tonk Angel* (1972) and *We the People* (1973). By the late 1970s, Ellen was venturing into the world of electric lead guitar. She continued touring and, at one point, joined forces with Jack Bruce and Paul Wertico on her album, *Everybody Needs It* (1982).

When I was coming up, I did not know any females who played with the kind of ferocity of Ellen McIlwaine. What I did not realize then, and only came to understand after speaking with Ellen, were the hardships she had gone through as a young female guitarist trying to establish herself. Ellen opened up about the struggles with self-esteem she endured as an emerging artist.

I didn't learn the way someone else does it, and so I was really sort of a pariah for a long time in the business. I didn't fit in the box or play nice little songs . . . I had one album—They called it *Ellen McIlwaine*—but I wasn't allowed to play the guitar on it. There's very little of me in it. It was the first and last bad press I ever got. I can remember spending nights holding my acoustic guitar, sitting in a chair and crying, rocking back and forth. That happened in 1978 or '80. It was a disastrous experience for me. Then I started playing electric guitar. Of course, I wasn't in a position to play lead yet, really, but I was starting to do it. I was determined to do it. (Ellen McIlwaine)

After Lita Ford left The Runaways, she launched out on her own as a heavy metal guitar shredder. Ford speaks of the lack of recognition and

acceptance shown to female guitarists. The general presumption from those that heard her band was that she was not really the lead guitarist on her solo albums.

The biggest misconception people have about me would be, “did she really play the guitar on that? That’s not her playing the guitar, that’s the other guy.” A lot of times, I would be on stage and I would be playing the solo, but I would see the spotlight go on the other guitar player. It’s like, “wait a minute, it’s me.” People can’t swallow, they can’t grasp the idea that a female is doing that. Even today, people ask me, “who played the guitar solo on ‘Close My Eyes Forever?’” I mean, I did, and it’s not even really that difficult a solo. But that is by far the biggest misconception. (Lita Ford)

Joan Armatrading, who is mainly known as a singer-songwriter but has been playing lead guitar her entire career, describes a similar misconception:

I think a lot of people don’t realize that I play guitar. They might hear the guitar on my records, but they just assume it’s somebody else. When I did the record *What’s Inside*, there’s a really bluesy song in there. It has a great guitar solo and everything. The record company did a focus group on it, and they asked, “Who’s playing the guitar?” They mentioned just about every guitarist you could think of, but only one person thought it could be me. (Joan Armatrading)

Vicki Peterson of The Bangles spoke about how radio stations were reluctant to play too many girl group records.

There was also a moment in time where, you know, Belinda [Carlisle] was doing her solo career, and she would have a single out, and we would put our single out the same week, and we’d be calling radio, and doing our promotion, and there would be these certain instances where, “oh we can’t add you this week, because we just added Belinda. But we’ll add you next week.” Why is that? Because [is] there only one all-boy band . . . on your list this week? Why are we even having this conversation? That can just be completely befuddling. But it was real. (Vicki Peterson)

There were few female guitar role models in the mid 1960s when Alice Stuart’s career took off.

It used to be you felt like you were in a circus or freak show. I always felt like I was being judged as a woman instead of a player. So, that’s been one of my goals—to get that first impression out of people’s heads. I must say, though, sometimes it helps because it’s so impressive when you do get up there and really play.⁴ (Alice Stuart)

Jennifer Batten broke out like a supernova in the late 1980s as the lead guitarist for Michael Jackson when he was at the height of his fame. Until she arrived, the idea of a woman shredding lead guitar in pop music was

almost unheard of. There had only been a few before her, most notably Lita Ford. Ford was better known in the heavy metal realm, though, than in mainstream pop music.

Michael Jackson seemed to delight at featuring Jennifer Batten in his videos and live concerts. When I watch those videos now, I still get a little breathless at the level of excitement of Jackson and the audience when Jennifer rips into her solos. She came out so strong, riffing Eddie Van Halen licks, double-tapping, and playing at lightning speed. She broke through the glass ceiling, and she proved at that moment that there should be no delineation between men and women as far as technical virtuosity on the instrument goes.

Jennifer Batten talked about the cutthroat competitiveness of the music business and the attitudes she got early on from other players.

I have run into a lot of bastards in the business. I think some of the male guitar players are pissed off that I have been successful and have had great gigs. It's always the illusion of lack, like there's not enough gigs to go around, and I got a couple of the best ones. (Jennifer Batten)

Jennifer's first solo album, *Above Below and Beyond* (1992), featured her version of the classical composition, "Flight of the Bumblebee," which she played at a breathtaking speed, showing off her agility and virtuosity. It was clear that she was proving herself as one of the top-tier players on the scene. It reminded me that we all have to establish ourselves in the proving ground, and for women who undertake this line of work, often extra measures are required.

Forty years before Batten worked with Michael Jackson, Mary Osborne became the subject of a legendary proving-ground tale of her audition with Joe Venuti. Mary quickly surprised the bandleader with the depth of her abilities.

In 1942, jazz violinist Joe Venuti was looking for a flashy guitar player for his stage show, featuring singer Kay Starr and The Andrews Sisters. He agreed to give the twenty-one-year-old Mary Osborne an audition as a courtesy. Speculation at the time was that Venuti was not wholly serious about it but rather was treating it like a joke, a chance to teach the young girl how "real" musicians play. The resulting episode was described in detail in a retrospective article in *Vintage Guitar* magazine, with input from Osborne's son, Ralph Scaffidi, Jr.:

After a show at the Capitol Theater, Venuti had Mary come by for an audition. "Word got around that Joe was going to humiliate some gal who plays guitar," said Ralph, Jr. "So a crowd of musicians gathered outside his dressing room. Venuti chose some obscure tune like 'Wild Cat' or 'Chop Suey'—a tune from the

1920s. When my mom asked for the key, Venuti said, 'I'll just start, and you follow.' So he kicked it off at a frantic tempo, but she started following him through the changes. He got to where he would pull a key change every four bars, but she would follow right along. This went on for 10 or 15 minutes before Venuti said, 'You're coming with me on the road!'"⁵

Carol Kaye started out as a jazz guitarist before she became one of the world's most renowned bass players and session musicians. She spoke of the high stakes and expectations that an average bebop musician worked under. The fact that she was fourteen when she started gigging was an astounding testimony to her talent and drive.

It's not simple if you think about the tunes that we had to play. I had to play "Rose Room" or "Exactly like You," things that had a million chords to them. It wasn't three-chord rock and roll at all. You had to know all the chords. I was playing solos. It was similar to Charlie Christian because he really innovated the solo guitar. When you listen to that music, it's got a ton of chords to it, and you know what to do. I couldn't solo on every tune, but I did enough . . . with each gig, I got better and better. At the age of fourteen, that meant a lot of money to me so that I could buy food for my mother and myself. (Carol Kaye)

Lita Ford spoke not only of being ahead of her time but also of the lengths she went to establish herself in the 1980s heavy metal scene.

When I first started a band, I put together a three-piece band with just guitar, drums, and bass, no other guitar player. So I really threw myself into the fire, and I forced myself into learning how to sing and play at the same time. I had to do it, being the only guitar player and singer . . . I rented a warehouse, and I locked myself in there, and we would just sit in there and sing and play and scream our heads off. . . .

I had to learn how to play without looking at the guitar. I never wanted to use effects, either. We went to see some band once, and I was in the girls' bathroom between shows, and I could hear one of the girls talking to another girl in the bathroom, and they said, "oh yeah, all she did was step on a box, she didn't even play the guitar." I figured, "okay, no boxes." So I would plug straight into the amp and not use any boxes or effects. (Lita Ford)

When I asked Ford about her use of the double neck guitar, which was another first for a female, she said, "Yeah, that's my baby. That's another thing that I thought would be different. I really jumped into the fire full force."

The Poetic Nature of Female Expression

It's more of a poetic thing that happens with women players just by nature. Technically, women can do anything that men can do, but what they create more naturally is usually less of a flashy thing and more of a poetry thing. (NANCY WILSON)

I was nine years old when Heart's *Little Queen* (1977) was released. Of the two Wilson sisters, I immediately identified with Nancy, the fair-haired beauty who played the guitar. Nancy Wilson began playing acoustic and moved to electric as her career evolved. She has mainly played rhythm guitar in Heart and in her own solo career. Nancy shared some insights on what could be considered feminine attributes to playing.

I had an electric guitar that I liked to play, but I was mainly an acoustic player first. And then, in the band, I got a chance to step up and do a few leads here and there. The guys in the band taught me how to play a little more lead here and how to be a good support player. A lot of it's what not to play, right? It's when to shut up. . . .

There are a lot of flashy guy lead players like Hendrix and Page. They come from a male spirit, and when girls go up and try to, you know . . . whack off, it's just not quite the same. A lot of girls can do that. I've seen a lot of girls able to play, technically, anything a guy can play. But there's a different kind of soul, and I think a lot of it's just the basic instinct of women. It's more nurturing. And there's a lot less "proving it," and it's not a posture. It's not a saber rattle. It's more of a poetic thing that happens with women players just by nature. So yeah, I think it's ridiculous to try and compare. (Nancy Wilson)

Undoubtedly, there are many ways to express oneself on the instrument, and being female does not necessarily mean playing "like a female." But, if we consider what are traditionally thought of as feminine characteristics, elements such as receptivity, gentleness, creativity, and supportiveness might come into play. And perhaps the willingness to sacrifice one's ego for the greater good. These attributes are not delineated by the sexes, as I have witnessed many women who play very aggressively, and I have also witnessed many men who play with great sensitivity and tenderness. Based on my experiences playing with groups of men, all-female groups, and mixed bands, I would argue that most female guitarists feel at ease in a supportive role and are not overly concerned with showing others up or conquering another musician on the bandstand—unless provoked, in which case, all bets are off!

Alice Stuart described using the instrument like a voice. This approach carries the theme of the music forward without the need for over-playing and pyrotechnics. She also stresses the importance of bolstering the other musicians on stage.

I definitely love to rip it up, but I also tend to play the guitar like it's an extension of my voice. I think of the melody, or if I'm playing backup guitar, I think what's going to accent what the other players are doing. I played with Albert King, and he picked me up off the floor and said, "honey, you play good guitar." If Albert King says I can play, that's all right with me. (Alice Stuart)

Kathy Valentine has been working as a musician for over forty years. She started her first band in Austin at the age of sixteen. By her early twenties, Kathy had moved to Los Angeles to launch her music career. By a chance encounter in a public bathroom with The Go-Go's guitarist Charlotte Caffey, she was asked to join an up-and-coming all-female band. Kathy became the bass player of the group, but she also wrote and co-wrote some of the band's most memorable songs, such as "Vacation" (1982) and "Head Over Heels" (1984). The Go-Go's were signed to IRS in 1981, and they recorded their debut album, *Beauty and The Beat* (1981). Together, they made history as the first all-female band to have a number-one album in the United States. In 2021, The Go-Go's became the first all-female band to be inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. Kathy has since gone on to front several other all-female bands based in Austin, Texas, most notably, The Bluebonnets, which also features Austin guitar slinger Eve Monsees. Kathy explains her passion for playing in all-female ensembles.

Good female musicians have more mystique to me. Maybe because it's just not the norm—even though it's not such a rare thing. I think partly because there hasn't been the "ultimate female band." There hasn't been The Stones or The Beatles . . . and part of me just wants it to exist. I want them to be up in the pantheon of rock.

(Kathy Valentine)

Breaking Through to Wide Acceptance

I was in my early twenties and just about to record my first album when Bonnie Raitt was dominating the Billboard music charts and taking home multiple Grammy Awards. As a young, white, blues-playing female guitarist, I considered myself unique. That is until I realized Bonnie had been doing the same thing decades before me.

Bonnie seemed to have the perfect balance of singer/songwriter and instrumentalist. She did not shred on the guitar, but instead, she used well-crafted slide solos to accentuate her songs and her singing. The overall effect was a gentler approach than Jennifer Batten and Lita Ford's "in your face" guitar domination stance. It was more digestible for the average audience. Even though she played in an understated style, Bonnie's guitar work was sublime. Her tone, phrasing, and technique all managed to accentuate her dynamic vocals and great songs. She hit the sweet spot.

Bonnie has won ten Grammys and was presented with a Lifetime Achievement Grammy. *Guitarist* magazine put her in a handful of the top electric guitar players ever,⁶ along with Jeff Beck, Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy

Page, and Derek Trucks. Her album, *Nick of Time* (1989), is in the National Recording Registry in the Library of Congress. She is in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

When I spoke with Bonnie, I remarked on her influence on women in guitar. Bonnie handled that issue with humility and confidence.

I think I was just in the right place at the right time, in the early '70s, and playing blues guitar, especially slide, kind of set me apart from other women out there. I also think it's what helped keep my career going this long. I'm really proud I've been an inspiration to younger women—especially to get better on their instruments. I can tell from the letters and CDs I get from women, and they're rockin' on the guitar! (Bonnie Raitt)

Bonnie was mentored by many legendary blues-playing men and women, and she built lasting friendships with strong, outspoken female blues and R&B icons such as Ruth Brown and Sippie Wallace. Because she began learning her craft during the 1960s folk and protest movement, she did not feel isolated in her quest to be a lead guitarist. It turned out that playing lead guitar was the thing that set her apart and got her noticed.

I do think playing blues guitar, especially slide, “like a man,” or whatever the reviewers would say about my early gigs, definitely helped get my foot in the door and keep it there. I realized when I first started getting those early comments that it must have been unusual, so I was just glad to have something that set me apart from the pack. But I didn't feel isolated. I just felt proud. (Bonnie Raitt)

Bonnie Raitt is a prime example of why role models make such a difference for females trying to find their place in the world of guitar culture. Bonnie's commercial success changed the perceptions of what a multi-Grammy award-winning pop artist was. Suddenly, that person could be a middle-aged, down-to-earth, politically outspoken female lead guitar player. It was one for the team. For the many women I spoke with who felt alone and marginalized, there are also exceptions, like Bonnie, who managed their way through the terrain with relative ease and grace, and who made it to the top.

I never felt the pressure of being a girl 'cause I knew I could rock it whoever's band I was in. I can throw down in the Thompson Twins. Give them a little extra funk. You know? Yeah. Like, I could definitely play. (Felicia Collins)

Felicia Collins had one of the most high-profile gigs in the world from 1993 to 2015, playing lead guitar five nights a week on national network television in the house band led by Paul Shaffer on *Late Night with David Letterman*. When I observed Felicia on *Late Night*, I always thought that she seemed very comfortable in her skin. She smiled a lot, and she looked

like she owned her place on the bandstand. Paul Shaffer's band included some of the top players in New York City. By the time Felicia got that gig, there were already many women breaking through on the instrument, but I believe that just the presence of a woman doing this night after night with millions watching had a huge impact. Felicia brushed off my affirmation of this point, stating that it was more about the time in history.

I think it's just this time in the chronology that you just see it. That's all. I'm just an example of it happening more. I'm not the cause of it. To people that know me, it makes all the sense in the world. 'Cause I've been playing all my life. You find people in my grade school and go, "Do you ever remember Felicia Collins playing the guitar?" And they go, "Yeah, she played." (Felicia Collins)

When we spoke, she reiterated the fact that being female was not at all a hardship, but instead honestly said it was a blessing that got her a lot of opportunities.

Did I find it any pressure being a woman? No. If anything, that was my ace in the hole. You know, they didn't have to go, "Well, it's cute having a girl, but she can't throw down." It's like, "You mean we can get somebody that throws down and is a unique thing?" So, it was always like I knew whatever gig it was, I would have it. You know what I mean? (Felicia Collins)

Passing the Torch

Finding Memphis Minnie when I was sixteen changed my life and gave me a great sense of comfort. Until I knew about Minnie, I felt alone on my journey and, in many ways, rudderless. The more women guitar players that I discovered through the years, the more I realized I had never been alone. There had been all these supernovas orbiting around me the whole time. My intention with my interviews was simply to learn about what their journeys had been like and how they related to my own. Many of these women players opened up to me in ways they might not have done to a journalist, and I sensed that they had a strong urge to leave behind their stories and wisdom to support the next generation of females who ventured on this path.

The members of Fanny would have these meetings and say to each other, "We gotta stay together at least another year because we know there's other girls coming. We gotta do this for them." (June Millington, Fanny)

In the mid 1960s, June and Jean Millington were forming the first all-female band to release an album on a major label⁷ and one of the first to achieve Top 40 success on the *Billboard* Hot 100.⁸ Their band, The Sveltes,

later called Fanny, signed with Warner Brothers and released their debut album, *Fanny*, in 1970. Despite this success, June resisted the label's suggestions that Fanny should adopt a more hard-rock persona, the better to prove that chicks could kick ass, she says sarcastically. So, after four albums with Fanny, including one that broke the Top 40, June decided to leave the band. She describes the efforts expended to gain little traction.

We were a hardworking band. People don't realize how hard we worked. We worked non-stop. We worked 24/7 . . . We thought if we could just be good, that we would be recognized for it. But it took too long. By the time we started to get any recognition at all, I was losing it. So, that's why I left the band.

(June Millington)

After decades spent studying Buddhism and spirituality, June immersed herself into being a role model for upcoming female players. In 1986, along with her life partner Ann Hackler, June Millington cofounded the Institute for Musical Arts (IMA) with the aim of supporting women and girls in music. The institution's launch immediately drew the attention of notable women in the music industry, including Bonnie Raitt, who sat on the advisory board. Today, the institute is still active as a multicultural non-profit teaching and performing arts organization, with June serving as Artistic Director.

The Institute for the Musical Arts was a part of my own healing. One thing that we try to do at IMA is make people realize we're all going to screw up. We're all human beings. We're all trying to work it out. Then we realized we had a responsibility to pass it on. So that's what we're doing. And we're making it so that the next generation has a place from which to pass it on. (June Millington)

June spoke about the concept of "direct transmission"⁹ and how she strives to teach her female students to seek a deeper experience in music. She brings forth the gifts she received as a young musician in 1960s Los Angeles.

I think that the loss of direct transmission is profound in terms of musicality, number one. Number two, with the advent of technology, people do not even feel they have to learn how to play well. In fact, they do not need to play at all. Music is a conversation. It is profound. I treat these girls as if they need that drink of water. Most of them do not know they need it. Some of them do, of course, because they found their way to our camp. But they do not know what they are missing.

(June Millington)

When I spoke with Joan Armatrading in 2007, she had just been named President of the UK-based charity Women of The Year.¹⁰ Joan made strong arguments for supporting women and for teaching young women to be confident and assertive about their abilities.

You find yourself getting very, very emotionally attached to these women because of what they've done. When I was on tour just now, we went around to some schools and I said to the girls, "Don't be afraid to say you're good at something." Men are great at telling you how good they are. There is no embarrassment when they tell you they are the best at this, that they have achieved that, or that if it was not for them, this would not have happened. As a girl or a woman, it is perfectly fine for you to do the same. The confidence you give to yourself by admitting you are great at something is a huge boost. That's definitely something women should do.

(Joan Armatrading)

Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls/The Path Forward

In 2018, Fender made national headlines when it released a study that stated that 50 percent of guitar buyers were now women. That study astounded many people and brought to light what has been in the works for decades. There are now also magazines devoted entirely to female guitarists as well as dozens, if not hundreds, of all-female rock camps¹¹ and organizations around the world that support women and girls in their quest to be guitar players.

Being an influence does mean looking forward because it does bring it forward. The best part of you does move forward into the next chapter of women in music and just in music in general. But I couldn't be more pleased 'cause that's what I always was hoping—that I could imprint something that was in some way elevating and inspiring to people that heard our music—my music. So, it's like the people that inspired me and elevated me to do it in the first place. I know it sounds corny, but that's the shit, man.

(Nancy Wilson)

Well, we can be proud we're part of this breakthrough generation. And I think it's great that you're writing about it so we'll be able to mark how it's going down—influence the next ones.

(Bonnie Raitt)

Up Above My Head: Sister Rosetta Tharpe

Up above my head, I hear music in the air . . . And I really do believe, I really do believe, there's a heaven somewhere.¹² (SISTER ROSETTA THARPE)

One of the things I marvel at when I watch old videos of Sister Rosetta Tharpe is the sheer joy she exudes in performing and playing her guitar. She is unapologetically putting everything out there, her strident lead guitar solos, her forceful vocals, and her moves, guitar windmills, and

duck walking. With an unbridled spirit, she owns her place on the bandstand. There is no defensiveness to Rosetta's approach. It is pure expression coming straight from the source. Rosetta was an astoundingly great musician, and I highly doubt that there was anyone saying, "She's good for a girl."

Music travels through time and space. It's in the air that we breathe. Music holds no delineations. It does not care whose ears it reaches. There are no boundaries with music. There are no classes. There are no genders. Upon hearing a piece of guitar music, if you were to close your eyes, would you know if the guitarist playing the solo was male or female? Audibly, most would not be able to delineate between the genders. Even a trained ear might not pick up on the subtleties. However, if you were to see the performer of the guitar solo, and it was a woman, how would you feel? Empowered, excited, and turned on? Or confused, repelled, and uncomfortable? How about conflicted? From my experiences and from the stories I've gathered, I know that few are indifferent.

I have to play. You know how it is. You have to play what comes out of you. In order to do that, you can't try to put the brakes on. Women do. We're concerned about how we look. Am I attractive to men? Do I sound okay? Am I not too threatening? I think because all this is swirling around in our heads, we play music like we're driving around with the emergency brake on. We don't need to do that. We're constantly judging ourselves. Doing whatever women do. Getting surgery, going on diets, and doing all this stuff. I think we should just play the music.

(Ellen McIlwaine)

Notes

Special thanks to Landon Curry for advising and research assistance.

1. It's worth noting that just two years prior to the *Guitar Player* feature, *Rolling Stone* magazine listed their top 100 guitarists of all time which named only two females, Bonnie Raitt and Joni Mitchell. Available at www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/100-greatest-guitarists-153675/lindsey-buckingham-39147 (accessed May 3, 2023).
2. The National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress contains 625 items selected for their cultural, historical, or aesthetic significance in informing or reflecting life in the United States. The Registry includes many types of significant recordings, such as governmental speeches, spoken word broadcasts, comedy, field recordings, and many others. The Registry also includes a wide variety of music, such as pop, jazz, orchestral, folk, rock, and others. See Library of Congress, "Complete National Recording Registry Listing." Available at <https://bit.ly/43fYsHB> (accessed May 3, 2023).
3. Paul Garon and Beth Garon, *Woman with Guitar: Memphis Minnie's Blues* (Da Capo Press, 1992), p. 57.
4. Sue Foley, "He Picked Me Up Off the Floor and Said, 'Honey, You Play Good Guitar!': Alice Stuart Talks Playing with Albert King and Frank Zappa," *Guitar Player* (2023). Available at <https://bit.ly/3IT3SPR> (accessed May 3, 2023).
5. Jim Carlton, "Mary Osborne, Charlie's Angel," *Vintageguitar.com*. Available at www.vintageguitar.com/8559/mary-osborne (accessed June 29, 2023).

6. Beverley Wettstein, "Women Need to Pull More Strings and Stop Playing Second Fiddle: Bonnie Raitt Picked As Only Female Of '100 Guitar Heroes,'" *Huffpost* (2015). Available at <https://bit.ly/48O1zrb> (accessed May 3, 2023).
7. Margot Edwards, "ROCKRGRL Honors Fanny, Legendary Female Band, at Berklee," Berklee College of Music (2007). Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20080515101605/http://www.berklee.edu/news/2007/01/0125.html> (accessed May 3, 2023).
8. AllMusic, "Fanny." Available at www.allmusic.com/artist/fanny-p17433/charts-awards/billboard-singles (accessed May 3, 2023).
9. Direct transmission relates to seeing an artist live and in person. June was emphatic about this subject, that there is an elevated and often transformative experience that happens in a live setting that cannot be experienced any other way.
10. Women of the Year is an annual charity luncheon in the UK, which recognizes women of notable achievement. Each guest invited to the lunch is regarded as a "Woman of the Year." Available at www.womenoftheyear.co.uk/our-history (accessed November 1, 2022).
11. Rock n' Roll Camp for Girls debuted in Portland, Oregon, in 2001. The camp attracted attention, and soon after, similar camps were launched under the name Girls Rock Camp. The camps became all the rage. Twenty years later, the Girls Rock Camp Alliance is still strong, with over sixty camps operating worldwide.
12. Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Marie Knight with Sam Price Trio, "Up Above My Head, I Hear Music in The Air" (Decca, 1949).

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