



Race and misogyny in music

Listening to the radio in our family car has become a dangerous sport. A game of dexterity, speed and skill.

As a black feminist mother, I try to limit the exposure of my young children to the overt & explicit misogyny rife in many music genres today.

Spotting these kinds of lyrics amongst the cacophony of electronic dance beats, wailing and screeching and racing to hit mute is no mean feat!

During the school run, the warbling strains of Nick Jonas caught my attention. I was struck by the main 'hook' where he asserts to his woman 'it's my right to be hellish, I still get jealous'.

The legitimacy of whether this is a true rhyming couplet aside, I found the concept behind this statement seriously worrying.

Working with victims and survivors of domestic abuse, I am all too familiar of where this 'hellish' behaviour can lead to for women in relationships where the men feel entitled to get jealous.

Currently 2 women are murdered in this country every week by men. All too often these murders are excused away as jealous rages – with one of the country's most senior judges proclaiming that we should understand this 'loss of control' by the man due to jealous provocation by the woman.

This attitude of victim blaming is not limited to adults – a recent Scottish study on young people's attitudes to violence against women & girls showed some startling results – overwhelming numbers of young men and women thought it was acceptable to be physically violent to women if jealousy was involved. Jealousy 'provoked' from them wearing revealing clothing to allegations of cheating.

The lyrics also go onto state that the young woman who has inspired the song is 'too sexy, beautiful and everybody wants a taste – that's why I get jealous...I don't like the way he's looking at you – I'm starting to think you want him too. Am I crazy, have I lost you?...I wish you didn't have to post it out, I wish you'd save a little for me...'

This pretty much summarises Unhealthy Relationship 101, but amidst the catchy track we hum and nod along. Oblivious to the fact that it reinforces accepted notions of victim blaming and justifying violence against women. The fact these lyrics are played on mainstream, primetime radio makes them readily accessible to young people and children and normalises them.

The idea that abuse is love or that men have the 'right' to kill/abuse women over their being too sexy and 'provoking' jealousy is certainly not a new one. This idea being perpetuated through mainstream music is not new either.



From 'He hit me and it felt like a kiss' by The Crystals to Tom Jones 'Delilah' through to stalkers anthem 'Every breath you take' by The Police, the message is clear.

The stark reality of these messages are women like Hayley Stringer, 29, who paid for her abusers belief in these delusions with her life and the countless other women, abused and killed daily in the name of men's rights to get jealous and therefore hellish.

What fresh faced, cute peddlers of pop such as Nick Jonas also highlight is the disturbing blindspot we have when looking at race, popular culture and misogyny.

Music like many aspects of our lives is racialized - particular genres of music are assigned racial identities and we start to think of genres such as hip hop being Black and music such as country or folk music as being White.

We readily associate Black music with being gritty, urban. Music that exploits women whether it is through highly sexualised rap videos to sexually explicit and derogatory lyrics in the songs. White music, such as country, rock/metal – doesn't have the same connotations or analysis and is often assumed as being innocuous towards women.

We accept that misogyny in music is dangerous, we accept that it is degrading and for the most part we accept that this is an issue within Black music. This further becomes an issue that the Black community need to look at and address.

The often spurious links between the evils of rap music and perceived issues in the Black community is well documented. We seem to believe that Black people are more likely to make woman hating music because you know, they grow up with no fathers, sell drugs and have no education. We pathologise Blackness and thus the Blackness of the music becomes problematic.

White men largely croon away under the radar whether it be Tom Jones with his murderous classic 'Delilah'..'I felt the knife in my hand – she laughed no more' to the rock anthems of Guns & Roses It's So Easy ' ..turn around b**ch, I got a use for you, nothing better to do' to the really disturbing horror/porn imagery featured in a lot of the metal bands imagery and album concepts.

White artists are sometimes taken to task but not in the same way as when we examine 'Black music'. We do not view this as a 'community' issue– White people are not exhorted to analyse what it is about themselves and each other that makes Guns & Roses think their lyrics are acceptable. Nor do we look for 'reasons' why white men make these kinds of music – lack of fathers?, police brutality? High levels of crime where they live?

Instead of acknowledging that sexist lyrics and imagery in music is a reflection of the misogyny that exists on a global scale, we explain this away by pretending it is an issue for one group of people.

By doing so, we start to believe that misogyny is a feature of particular ethnic groups. We start



to believe that Black men are more predisposed to raping, beating and sexually exploiting women.

So when White men such as Nick Jonas sing songs about getting hellish and jealous we do not see this as major issue.

One Direction whining about 'Everybody wanna steal my girl' like she is an expensive possession is not seen as problematic.

Nickleback having 'Figured out' that he loves his hands around the neck of a girl that has just passed out on his deck (Yes, really), is ignored.

The Whiteness of the artist and the music becomes a shield, normalising and minimising misogynist content.

As the great Audre Lourde said, there is no hierarchy of oppression. We cannot examine and explore gender without acknowledging race. This means being aware of the systematic nature of racism and challenging ourselves to be reflexive in all our perspectives and concerns.

If we fail to do this, all we do is perpetuate the false notion that one group of people or one genre of music is less damaging to women than another, based on flawed lines of race.

We edit the 'bad' songs to make them radio friendly without noticing that many of the 'good' pop songs that play unchallenged aren't very friendly to women at all.

In the meantime the radio in my family's car journeys is switched off.