

Why Are Girls Turned Off?

Where are all the girls? It's a question worth asking as the guitar industry enters its fourth year of flat sales. By any measure, the ability of makers and retailers of guitars to appeal to the 50.5% of the population in possession of two X chromosomes is pretty dismal. Girls may be attracted to guys playing guitar (or at least that's what the industry has been telling teenage boys for the past five decades) but they don't seem to be terribly interested in the guitar itself. Warranty registrations and other data from leading manufacturers suggest that women account for just 20% of new acoustic guitar sales and about 10% of new electric guitar sales.

The dearth of female guitar purchasers is even more striking when compared with other ostensibly male-oriented products. Take firearms for one example. According to the National Rifle Association, women accounted for 35% of all gun permits issued last year. Levy's Leathers, which manufactures both guitar and gun straps, reports that a pink camouflage rifle strap for women is one of their perennial top sellers. Sales for a comparable pink guitar strap? Too small to even measure. What could be more macho than a Harley Davidson? Yet the company that supplies wheels to the Hells Angels reports that women account for close to 30% of new Hog sales. Who would have thought that females are more inclined to buy a motorcycle or a gun than a guitar?

It wasn't always this way. Fretted instruments originated in the Tigris-Euphrates delta (now part of Iran) 3,000 years ago. With trade and tribal migration, they spread across the European peninsula, and took numerous forms including the lute, the oud, and the guitar. By the early 1600s, when the guitar became popular in Spain, proficiency was considered a sign of female accomplishment and refinement. The famous Vermeer portrait of the girl with a guitar, reproduced above, captures the place of the guitar in 17th century European society: an instrument that allowed upper-class women to display their grace and talents.

Two hundred years later in the United States, fretted instruments were still primarily a female pursuit. The Italian immigrants who flocked to American shores in the 1880s brought with them pasta, grand opera, and the mandolin, all of which were enthusiastically embraced by the entire populace. By

1900, the mandolin was the top-selling fretted instrument, and mandolin orchestras, largely populated by women, were commonplace from coast to coast. Guitar playing as a male pursuit emerged in 1930s with the ascendance of popular figures such as the Singing Brakeman Jimmie Rodgers, arguably the first country music star, and singing cowboy Roy Rogers.

By the late 1940s, U.S. manufacturers reported that guitar sales were evenly divided between the sexes. Since then female participation seems to have steadily trended downward. What's particularly ironic is that the shrinking participation has corresponded to female empowerment in every other realm of society. A century ago, when female fretted instrumentalists were common, women didn't even have the right to vote and the thought of a woman CEO, U.S. President, or senator was unthinkable. Now that women populate high corporate and government offices, however, they seem less inclined to strum a few chords.

With so many other opportunities for channeling their talents, have women abandoned the guitar for other pursuits? Or have they been put off by a male-dominated industry that's not terribly inclusive? Do women feel subconsciously that playing guitar makes them less serious? Or are they not terribly inclined to emulate any of the pantheon of guitar heroes—Hendrix, Clapton, Page, Van Halen, etc? We don't profess to have the answers to these questions, and we're not even sure they're the right questions to ask. Historically, because the industry's fortunes have been tied to larger social trends beyond its control, we doubt there's any quick and easy way for guitar

retailers and manufacturers to address the guitar industry's gender imbalance. However, given that even a slight improvement in the female participation rate could inject growth into a stagnating market, it's an issue deserving of more consideration.

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Guitar through the ages—from a symbol of feminine grace to a "men only" club. What happened?