

REVIEW

ROSEMARY LUCY HILL, BIANCA FILEBORN AND CATHERINE STRONG (EDS.) (2025).

UNSILENCED: WOMEN MUSICIANS, GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE, AND THE POPULAR MUSIC INDUSTRY.

by Maria Blengino

Unsilenced is a groundbreaking and necessary publication that intervenes in conversations about gender, violence, power, and cultural labour. Edited by Rosemary Lucy Hill, Bianca Fileborn, and Catherine Strong, the book addresses a major gap in scholarship on popular music: while numerous studies have analysed gender inequality, objectification of women, and unequal access to opportunities, very few¹ have examined gender-based violence as a structural component of music production. From the opening pages, the editors make explicit that this volume is politically situated: it comes from pain, anger, and solidarity and refuses to present violence as exceptional (1f.). Instead, violence is framed as a predictable outcome of how the industry is organised. This framing places *Unsilenced* in direct continuity with feminist musicology, yet pushes its boundaries in a direction that previous scholarship only partially anticipated.

Popular music studies have long examined gendered exclusions. Marion Leonard, for example, analysed how women are marginalised within the

1 These exceptions include *Sexual Violence and Gender Equality in Grassroots Music Venues: How to Facilitate Change* (2020) by Rosemary Lucy Hill, an exploration of gender-based violence in grassroots live-music spaces, and *The Sound of Misogyny: Sexual Harassment and Violence in the Music Industry* (2023) by McCarry et al., a study of sexual harassment and violence in the music industry context.

rock field.² Mavis Bayton showed how they are discouraged from playing electric instruments.³ Angela McRobbie exposed how femininity is controlled and policed by cultural industries.⁴ What *Unsilenced* adds is a deeper, more urgent layer: it demonstrates that beyond exclusion and objectification, there is violence, and that this violence is made invisible through systematic silence. Silence is not simply the absence of speaking; it is a mechanism actively produced by the industry through reputation management, gate-keeping, and professional risk (14).

The first chapter, »Introduction« (1-24), describes how violence is embedded in the everyday realities of labour. Employment in music relies heavily on informal networking, touring, and blurred boundaries between personal and professional spaces. As it is also argued by Mark Banks, musicians often need to maintain availability and flexibility,⁵ which may place them in semi-private settings—including studios, backstage areas, and post-show gatherings—that fall outside conventional workplace boundaries. In such contexts, formal structures of accountability disappear, and silence functions as currency. The editors of *Unsilenced* write that speaking about abuse is often framed as »unprofessional« and the threat of reputational damage becomes a disciplinary instrument (14). Here, the book links violence to labour precarity: in an industry where contracts are informal and careers depend on gatekeepers, reporting abuse becomes an economic risk, as this aspect is also argued by Rosalind Gill.⁶

The second chapter, »Musicians Negotiating Post-Abuse Identities« (25-48), turns from structural analysis to lived experience. Through interviews and first-person accounts, the editors explore how survivors rebuild both their identity and their professional credibility after abuse. They introduce the concept of post-abuse identity as an ongoing negotiation between the desire to speak and the need to remain employable (27). A significant portion of the chapter shows how musicians develop strategies to manage risk: avoiding certain venues, turning down tours, changing stage presence or styling to appear less approachable, or carefully monitoring their emotional expressiveness. The chapter asserts further that survivors learn to perform a version of themselves that appears »strong enough not to be a problem, but not assertive enough to be a threat« (38). This is not merely emotional labour. It is labour required to remain in the industry. Abuse is thus not confined to a

2 Marion Leonard (2007). *Gender in the Music Industry*. London: Routledge.

3 Mavis Bayton (1998). *Frock Rock*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

4 Angela McRobbie (2009). *The Aftermath of Feminism*. London: SAGE.

5 Mark Banks (2017). *Creative Justice*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.

6 Rosalind Gill (2007). »Postfeminist media culture.« In: *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10 (2), pp. 147-166.

single event; it transforms into a haunting that shapes the entirety of a career, as also Cathy Caruth emphasises.⁷

One of the most striking passages states that »if they speak, they risk their career; if they remain silent, they risk themselves« (33). Silence is therefore not chosen; it is coerced. Not speaking becomes a condition for access to work, networks, stages and audiences. The chapter also challenges the stereotype of the passive victim. Survivors are shown as actors navigating impossible choices within hostile infrastructures (ibid.). They structure their lives around work and avoidance of situations where informal professional interactions may expose them to risk, thereby protecting both their mental health and their career. This perspective expands feminist discourse in popular music studies: violence here is not only physical or emotional, but profoundly professional.

Chapter 3, »Music Industry as the Abuser« (49–74), represents the theoretical core of the book. Hill, Fileborn, and Strong argue that the music industry does not simply tolerate violence, nor does it merely fail to address it. Rather, the industry acts as the abuser (49). The industry becomes the perpetrator, not only through individuals, but through processes, routines, and economic interests. Violence is not a deviation but a mechanism that ensures productivity, hierarchy, and creative output (50). The chapter demonstrates that violence is »produced through the everyday functioning of the industry« (ibid.). The authors argue that the industry's institutional structure creates dependency relationships, in which access to opportunities is mediated by powerful intermediaries rather than controlled by artists themselves (ibid.), and these relationships often lack transparency or oversight. Power is personal, not procedural. As a result, individuals with influence can use that power to demand emotional, sexual, or physical compliance.

A key mechanism analysed in this chapter is the cultural narrative of the »male genius« (49–62), as also argued elsewhere by Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie.⁸ Popular music culture continues to glorify charismatic male artists, framing controlling or aggressive behaviours as signs of artistic temperament (62). When men behave abusively, such behaviour is reframed as eccentricity or misunderstood brilliance. When women name the abuse, they are framed as »unstable«, »too emotional«, or »difficult to work with« (62). This connects directly with existing scholarship. In 1978, McRobbie and Frith already showed how rock discourses construct the male artist as the creative centre and women as supporting figures. *Unsilenced* demonstrates

7 Cathy Caruth (1996). *Unclaimed Experience*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

8 Simon Frith, Angela McRobbie (1987). »Rock and Sexuality.« In: *Screen Education* 29, pp. 3–19.

how this mythology protects abusers and silences victims. The belief that art requires sacrifice becomes a narrative that legitimises harm.

Chapter 4, »Musical Abuse and Musical Responses to Gender-Based Violence« (75–96), expands the field of analysis by exploring how musicians use music as testimony. Rather than speaking through press statements or legal channels—risky and often ineffective—musicians may communicate trauma through sound. Some survivors write lyrics that narrate abuse; others use dissonance, distortion, or non-linguistic sound to express affect. »Some musicians find a voice through sound when words cannot be spoken«, the editors write (79). The chapter suggests that music becomes a counter-archive: a space where violence is not suppressed but transformed into artistic presence. Performance itself becomes testimony. If chapter 3 shows how the industry systematically silences, chapter 4 shows how survivors unsilence themselves. By turning trauma into art, musicians resist the industry's attempt to control narrative and meaning.

The conclusion, »Toward a Politics of Feminist Listening« (97–116), proposes a change model that goes beyond individual accountability. Hill, Fileborn, and Strong argue that listening is not passive; it is an act of redistribution of power: »To listen is to believe. To believe is to act« (103). Feminist listening requires recognising that silence is structurally enforced. Listening, therefore, becomes a form of activism: a refusal to participate in the suppression of testimony. The conclusion moves from diagnosis to transformation, calling for independent reporting structures, dismantling of genius narratives, and the end of reputation-based silencing.

Beyond its case studies and theoretical contributions, the book's methodology itself is a political statement. The use of autoethnography and survivor narratives challenges hierarchies of knowledge. Traditional academic writing separates the personal from the academic; feminist methodology rejects that distinction. Here, lived experience is not anecdotal evidence: it is primary data produced by those who endure the violence. The material collected is emotionally heavy, but the editors manage to hold academic rigour while avoiding what I would describe as »extractive« research practices—by extractive I mean that they do not treat survivors' testimonies as material to be mined for academic gain, but as knowledge produced by agentic subjects.

In relation to broader scholarship, *Unsilenced* builds on foundational feminist musicology yet advances it significantly. If Leonard, Bayton, and McRobbie described gendered exclusion, Hill, Fileborn, and Strong reveal gendered harm. If previous work traced inequalities, this book exposes the forms of violence that sustain them. While the volume focuses primarily on

Anglophone music industries, which could be seen as a limitation, it also seems true that the industry logic described here is global. The dynamics of gatekeeping, precarity, reputation, and silencing operate across borders, even if with local variations. Rather than a limitation, this focus opens avenues for future research, suggesting comparative studies in non-Anglophone contexts and in genres underrepresented in academic studies.

Unsilenced succeeds because it connects violence to labour. It reveals that abuse is not simply interpersonal harm but a structural expression of how power circulates within the music industry. Violence persists because silence is profitable, and silence is profitable because the industry requires it to operate smoothly. Survivors do not lack a voice—the industry lacks the will to hear them. Through critique, testimony, and feminist listening, the book transforms the act of naming violence into an act of resistance. For music scholars, it changes the theoretical conversation. For musicians, it validates lived realities. For feminist readers, it offers both analysis and tools for action.

Rosemary Lucy Hill, Bianca Fileborn and Catherine Strong (eds.) (2025). *Unsilenced: Women Musicians, Gender-Based Violence, and the Popular Music Industry*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic. (145 pp., paperback: \$17.46; hardback: \$77.00; eBook (EPUB, MOBI, PDF): \$15.71).