CSMC Podcast

Interview with Kristin Lieb

Miranda Banks

Interview with Kristin Lieb

Interview by Miranda Banks, Emerson College

Edited by Nina B. Huntemann, Suffolk University

Nina Huntemann: The following recording is a production of *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, publication of the National Communication Association and distributed by Taylor and Francis, under the Creative Commons attribution-noncommercial-share-alike license. For more information about this audio recording and *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, please visit Taylor and Francis at www.tandfonline.com. This interview is in two parts. You are listening to part 1. To find part 2, please return to the podcast feed where you downloaded this file, or visit the *Critical Studies in Media Communication* website at www.tandfonline.com.

Miranda Banks: Hello I am Miranda Banks, assistant professor of Visual and Media Arts at Emerson College, and I am sitting here with my colleague and friend, Kristin Lieb who is an associate professor of Marketing Communication at Emerson, and she has written a book, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry*, which was published by Routledge, Fall of 2013. And I am so excited to have this chance to sit down with you and talk about your book. It's such an insightful analysis of the music industry and its treatment of female artists.

Kristin Lieb: Thank you very much for having me.

MB: Good. So this book in general is really a look at the professional work of branding pop stars and I also want to congratulate you on an incredibly readable book. But I'm hoping kind of over the course of our conversation we can talk about a little bit about the origins of the book and then go into some of the research methods, talk about some key concepts and ideas, and then kind of talk about what has happened since the book's publication both in the industry and where your research has taken you now.

KL: Sounds great.

MB: Okay. So if we could start off with the origins of the book. Could you tell me a little bit about where the idea for this book came from? And how the project took shape?

KL: Sure. I first had the idea to start this work in my doctoral program where I had been studying something completely different. I had been studying perceptions of political bias in media coverage, and learning that what I was finding was what 70 people had found before me yet nobody believed the findings. So this was sort of frustrating work. I took a Media and Diversity class, and had never taken a Sociology course or a Gender Studies course or anything like it. And I saw Jean Kilbourne's *Killing Us Softly 3* in my class. I watched that video and was horrified in a way that I could hardly believe and thought, "wow, maybe there is something I could do like this about the music industry," because I think findings might be even more horrifying there. So I started to think about how I might be able to do that, and I thought, "well I have the luxury of having been in the music industry so I know people who actually produce these women for popular consumption." So maybe if I, rather than doing a reception study where I'd be looking at, you know, how 16 year olds respond to Brittany Spears – I had read many, many, many of those types of articles – what if I talked to people who sort of made Brittany Spears. Like, would that tell a different story, would that contribute more to the literature. I think so, so maybe I should see whether these people would be willing to talk with me. So that's sort of where it started. It became my dissertation project, I then you know started a full time faculty position, put it away for about 3 years, and then came back to it and said okay it's time to re-interview people, you know update all of the topics of conversation, look at what's happened in the intervening years, and turn this into a book that I might be able to use in my classes, other people might be able to use in a range of courses.

MB: Great. And were there certain questions that you wanted to answer for yourself, both either with the original project or when you returned three years later?

KL: Sure. There are a couple of things; one of them is sort of funny in a way. I started struggling with why most of my favorite, extremely popular artists were male and not female. I thought, this is not, I'm not antifeminist, I don't hate female artists when they succeed, so why is it that so many of the people that I love so much sort of tap out at the indie star level? Where as so many of the male performers I like start off as indie stars but are able to successfully transition as themselves into this higher level position. I realized a couple of things, and one is that we don't really know how to make female rock acts that resonate at the highest level of the industry. There's some sort of prohibitive, you know, thinking going on with respect to that. So one of the things I find in my book is that no matter what your genre of origin is, you're remade into a pop star. So you might start out in country, you might start in rock, you might start in hip hop, but you're going to be turned into this sort of general purpose pop star. So I realize that it's actually the positioning of these artists that's sort of offensive to me, that makes me not understand or want to interact with the top level stars in the same

way that the indie stars really do speak to me. So that's thing number one that got me thinking. And then as I realized it was something about the way these artists sort of speak to their audiences that was off putting to me, I started seeing commonalities in that and I thought, I wonder if that's intentional. I wonder if that's intentional in some way, and then I started thinking, and I also wonder if there is a gender difference. I wonder if there is something that's intentional about the way male pop stars are built for success and female pop stars are built for success. So that's really where my project began. The first question I asked all of my respondents is, is there a difference in the way female stars and male stars are brought to market, or young female talent or young male talent is brought to market? All of my respondents said yes, in various ways.

MB: Maybe we could talk a little bit about those research methods and how you worked in the music industry, and maybe you could tell, speak to that a little bit. How you got access to who you interviewed and who were your respondents.

KL: Absolutely. So when I worked in the music industry I did a number of different things, I first wrote for Billboard and *Rolling Stone*, so I had access to some journalists. I then moved on to running the web division of Newbury Comics, which is a music and pop culture retailor in New England. And so I knew people from sort of the digital music space and marketing, as a result of doing that also sort of independent retail. I then moved out to the west coast and worked for a hip hop label where I did marketing and business development, so that's where I got to know sort of managers and publicists and A&R executives and things like that. So I had a pretty broad base of experience. I also had three other jobs that are related to the music industry, but I don't want to sort of you know go into too much detail about that. But I thought once I started this project, why don't I start by calling people I know and saying, do you know anyone who has worked with platinum selling female artists, because that was going to be the concern of my book. I'm not going to be able to cover all female artists at every, you know, stage of their development, but if I focus maybe on those people who are capable, still capable in this day and age of selling gold or platinum, I would probably be able to do something. So I started off with people knew. You know, people I knew had worked with these artists asking them would you be willing to talk with me? If you wouldn't, would you have anybody else who might be able to? Would you have anyone in your network who has worked with this specific star? You know I might like to have that input. I'm not going to have them talking about the star specifically saying "when I did this with this star," but they can tell general stories about the management of a star or the way they were thinking about strategizing with the star. So, that's how I went about it. So, I ended up with a group of respondents who had mainly worked in the music industry for about 10-25 years, at sort of generally executive level capacity, so there were a couple of people in there. One was a

personal assistant to a platinum selling star. There are other moments. There are also artists who probably preformed at the indie star level, but either went on tour with platinum artists, with something like the Lilith Fair, or one of them, Kay Hanley, had friends at her own band Letters to Cleo, and does a lot of behind the scenes work for a number of different television programs, but went out on the road with Miley Cyrus as a backup dancer. These respondents know platinum selling pop stars in very interesting and varied ways, so I figured you know, by getting all these different perspectives I can really see what the reality of this situation is.

MB: Fantastic. Can you discuss kind of how you were thinking of the structure of this book a little bit before we talk about the next section?

KL: Sure. I think what I realized as I was writing this was how many fields would have something to say about it. And I knew that I had two home fields, which would be marketing and communication, and I know that communication borrows from Sociology and Psychology and Gender Studies, and so on and so forth. And I thought I need to dig deeper into those disciplines because while I may have, I may have encountered some of the literature, I know that I haven't encountered as much of it as might be useful to explaining what is basically a gender problem in the music industry. Right. I also have a music industry background so I could call that a home discipline, you know marketing communication and the music industry. So there is a representation problem in the music industry, but the roots of that representation problem in the music industry are sociological. So I had to look to sociology to say, okay, what's going on with constructions of gender? Why is it that we're more comfortable with a woman being a temptress than we are being a really proficient musician? Why is it that we're more comfortable representing women in some ways and not others, and why are these the categories that run the music business with respect to female performers? So then I go into Gender Studies, right, because we're going to learn something from Sociology but we're also going to learn from Gender Studies. You know, how is femininity or a feminine empowerment sort of represented versus masculinity or masculine empowerment, and how is that at work in the music industry? So I tried to draw together sort of threads from different disciplines and say, what if we, what if I didn't say inside my disciplinary boundaries to look at this? What if I borrowed a little bit from, you know pop culture studies, Sociology, Gender Studies, Comm, branding, music industry, to really try to look more holistically at why this problem exists and what might be done about it.

MB: So maybe if we could talk for a bit. There are a few key concepts and terms that you use early on in the book as kind of guiding principles. And there was two of them I really wanted to focus on. Let's start with the first one, which is the cultural diamond.

KL: Sure. Okay so the cultural diamond is Wendy Griswold sort of organizing framework for talking about how pop culture resonates and how you know many different things resonates, but for my purposes how pop culture resonates. So she says that a number of people want to try to establish causation. You know, this 50 year old horrible white manager made Miley Cyrus do you know this particular performance. Usually it's not simple. So what the cultural diamond says is that there are four points of interaction: there's the social world that we all live in, there's the cultural object which would be in this case the female pop star herself, Miley Cyrus, and then there are the producers of that cultural object, and the receivers of that cultural object. And that these points on the diamond reinforce each other; they don't necessarily cause each other. So Miley Cyrus as an example, is a cultural object but she lives in the social world with us, so she picks up cues about what it means to be a woman, what it means to be an attractive woman, what it means to be a successful woman. But she also picks up cues from her producers about what succeeds in the music industry, what succeeds if you're a child star transitioning into, you know, a more – I don't want to say adult star – but a mature female star in the music industry. And she also takes cues from her audience about what our expectations of female pop stars are. So that's how we get sort of the enigma that is Miley Cyrus at this point in time, rather than it being someone wagging their finger at her saying, you need to you know sort of cut down on the number of clothes you're wearing and do seductive dances on stage.

MB: So beyond the cultural diamond, which I think is very useful as we move forward, I wanted to have you discuss the person brand. We talk a lot about branding and it's a term that a lot of people, you know, different disciplines can discuss now, but in particular I found your explanation of a short term person brand useful, both the person aspect but also the short term model. And it seems as if that's so specific to this industry and this cycle that we're going to talk about later.

KL: Okay sure. In marketing literature I identified to gaps, and one is that we don't have any literature on short term brands, and plenty of brands are short term either by design or by marketplace reception. Right? So we have lots of literature on fads, something that's meant to last maybe 12-18 months, if even that, and lots of literature on long term brands – Budweiser, Coca-Cola, Chevrolet. Nothing in between, really. So I thought I think we need to start to talk about this as a concept. What is a short term brand, when is it useful, when is it not useful? Let's at least sort of identify it as something that exists and should be talked about. The person brand side of things I've seen a number

of people in the trades referring to people as person brands like Oprah, you know. And generally what people mean by this is this person could be an industry unto him or herself, right. So I think bringing these two things together, the short term person brand is a good way of thinking about women and the music industry because one of the findings in my book – one of the most disheartening findings – is that for these stars their core assets are their bodies. So if your core asset is your body, you can't really bank on that body for an extended period of time. So if we're focusing on your body more than your musical performance, that's necessarily going to shorten your career lifecycle. As we manage female pop stars in that reality, there's a more responsible way of doing it if we all call it what it is. Now hopefully in time, we're not managing female pop stars like that anymore. We're starting to accentuate their talent, right? In a way that sort of gives them the longer lifecycles of their male counterparts. But in the moment that we have right now, one of the fixes is more responsibly managing those careers.

MB: It seems to me is that if this concept of branding has become so over popular in the last maybe ten years or so. Just as a kind of touch off in a different topic, can you talk a little bit about and maybe explain in terms of the marketing side where this is coming from and why there is a popularity of branding as a model, and does that have to do with technology in some ways of crossing over brands or?

KL: I think that's, you probably hit the nail on the head with that. With technology we've each become our own brand in some way. People, rather than sort of being people in everyday life and having you know everyday interactions, people are selecting certain things about themselves that they will send out via Twitter, you know post on Facebook, you know post on Instagram. And so we're getting these sort of mediated versions of self, which is making everyone think about you know themselves to some extent of brands, right. There are millions of different meanings about you, but there's some sort of management in sort of representing your image, your image as a scholar, your image as a professor, your image as a friend, and so on and so forth. So I think everybody is thinking about it for that reason.

M: So in chapter three you give an overview of the structure of the contemporary music industry, could you talk a little bit about technological innovation and how it's changing opportunities for artists? Maybe even look at innovation over a little bit of time, so not necessarily just in this moment but innovations that were happening, you know, in the 90's as well.

KL: Sure. In terms of how technology has changed branding opportunities for female pop stars, it's given them the opportunity to really deepen relationships with their fans, and show different sides of themselves. And some of them have had incredible gains from those opportunities, specifically if you look at Taylor Swift or Lady Gaga's social media numbers, they are astronomical. And it's because they've managed to give something of themselves that's a little different than sort of the mediated version of self. I have no doubt that it's still mediated to some extent, but it feels more authentic, it feels like as a fan I have the opportunity to engage with these people in a more human kind of way. That is important for all kinds of sociological reasons, but it's also important from an industrial standpoint, because this relationship is what then enables these women to sell concert tickets, merchandise, fragrances, clothing lines, and so on and so forth moving forward. So for the female pop star where her career is really sort of portfolio based, it really isn't about the sales of music, it's about the sales of the products that sort of support the music where she really makes her fortune. So being able to deepen this relationship that makes people loyal to you, want to interact with, buy, consume in some way everything you do, that's been a big win for female pop stars.

MB: I wanted to ask you about MTV, where we started thinking about pop stars, and is that tied to an MTV issue or MTV moment?

KL: I think it's tied to MTV. That's basically where I start my inquiry. Because, I remember as a kid you know growing up you know, I had ten years before MTV entered my life. And you'd be riding around in a car and you'd hear a song and you'd say, that's a great song I want to go buy it at Musicland, and you would go and buy it at Musicland, and then you would say, ah that's what Bob Seager looks like! You would have that moment where you're like surprised you know, and sometimes the surprise is good and sometimes the surprise is not so good. So MTV comes along and then you're consuming the image as you consume the music, and it's very difficult to divorce it at that point. And so I think that did enable certain artists and it also made it much more difficult for other artists who had to come up with a new way of speaking sort of to the camera's gaze.

MB: Right. So when you're looking at your book, there aren't, there isn't a lot of space for the unattractive female artist.

KL: Sure, and even someone who is not even unattractive, right that's what's so shocking about the book. There's not a lot of room for people who aren't exceptionally attractive in a very specific way. So I even look at someone like Cindy Lauper and "Girls Just Want To Have Fun," and I look at that now, and I think wow, she's pretty much dressed herself up in drag so that she could be interesting enough to the camera.

MB: So you're saying that girls just really don't want to have fun?

KL: I think girls want to have a lot of fun.