



## Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry: The Social Construction of Female Popular Music Stars

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New Orleans-born piano giants who sparked a revolution in poly-rhythmic playing and infused American pop music with new sounds. Four of these men were Professor Longhair, Fats Domino, Allen Toussaint, and Dr John. The other one was Huey “Piano” Smith.

### Works Cited

Hannusch, Jeff. “Huey ‘Piano’ Smith: Don’t You Just Know It.” *I Hear You Knockin’: The Sound of New Orleans Rhythm and Blues*. Ville Platte, LA: Swallow, 1985. 34–44.

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### Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry: The Social Construction of Female Popular Music Stars

KRISTIN J. LIEB

New York: Routledge, 2013

ISBN: 978-0-415-89490-6

224 pp., \$35.95 (pb)

If you are one of the many people who can’t necessarily hum Miley Cyrus’s newest single but *can* picture her trademark tongue-out twerking, author Kristin Lieb probably would not be surprised. Her book, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry: The Social Construction of Female Popular Music Stars*, examines the creation and careers of various female musicians. Lieb discusses recent examples from Christina Aguilera to Adele, with interviews with music industry professionals and a multi-disciplinary collection of theory to inform conclusions about how female pop stars are made, maintained, and sold as brands. The fluidly organized book is structured in a way that allows the author to build her argument convincingly and allows the reader to absorb Lieb’s major points as they unfold chapter by chapter.

The book begins by establishing its main themes—branding, popular culture and the music industry, female pop stars as a singular case study—and components of the related key issues, which are broken down in ensuing chapters emphasizing that success rests upon more than just music and talent. The second chapter discusses a conception of female pop stars as brands themselves, effectively showing why marketing and entertainment research (e.g. on “person brands”) should be applied to this particular realm of the music industry to help us better understand the intersection of popular culture and branding (e.g. on female performers as short-term person brands). The next chapter, “The Modern Music Industry,” explores the

industry's relationship to popular culture. Suggesting that previous research has focused on audiences, Lieb discusses structural and music industry norms to contextualize and emphasize how and why producers contributing to the creation of popular music culture make their decisions. One of the most interesting implications here is that for a female pop star to succeed, it is not only about her music, but about the *gestalt* of her brand (think Kesha's reality TV show, Twitter feed, and latest single). As part of this, Lieb provides a useful distinction between conventional (record label presidents, A&R reps, *Rolling Stone*, etc.) and emerging (blogs, podcasts, *Glee*, etc.) popular music gatekeepers.

Chapters 4 and 5 explain the author's "lifecycle model for female popular music stars"—a highlight and a major contribution of the book—which is defined as "the predictable path a female star must follow as she navigates the music industry and works to capture the public's attention" (87). Lieb wisely admits that the purpose of her model is not to provide a one-size-fits-all "roadmap" (88) that ignores exceptions, but to illustrate the patterned types most hopeful performers must conform to if they desire super-stardom. One alarming finding is that, despite the model's differently patterned types, age and appearance are still constant, critical factors.

Based on 21 interviews with music industry professionals, her research discovers case after case of new performers fitting standard molds, such as the "good girl" (94) who transforms into a "hot mess" (122). Through her lifecycle model, Lieb draws many interesting conclusions, such as the requirement for women to use sex to market themselves, whereas men have more choice. Perpetuation of female stereotypes is surely a consequence of this problem. Here, Lieb argues that the lifecycle model reflects "nearly every pop star's career during the past three decades" (134). Is this hyperbole? Perhaps not, given Lieb's strong evidence and interpretations in the context of massively successful pop stars from Madonna to Lady Gaga.

Finishing, the author connects theory to her previous arguments and uses it to interpret those findings, drawing on communication and sociology research, work on gender performance and social construction of gender, plus much more. Through these interpretations, Lieb's book reminds us of the unfortunate fact that it is a bad strategy for an aspiring female singer to just go out there, sing, and "be yourself" to achieve large-scale success and become a pop star. Instead, the successful star needs to create a brand and persona that balances mainstream accessibility with differentiating features that do not step too far outside the boundaries of familiarity.

While the book's focus on female pop stars is beneficial and logical, it would also have been useful to tell the reader more about how this focus could inform the study of male pop stars or mixed-gender groups. Additionally, the book could have addressed the issue of intersectionality in regard to its emphasis on female performers, so that readers could more carefully consider how industry challenges might vary by race. Finally, while Lieb briefly draws on the concept of framing early on, further integration of this concept into the analysis of evidence would benefit our understanding of the role of media framing in the oversimplification and stereotyping that are a significant focus of the book.

Overall, Lieb expertly arrives at the goal of confronting the complex relationship between female pop singers, branding, and today's music industry through an effective and interesting mix of examples connected to related research. The book's content also makes it relevant to a variety of scholarly areas, including gender studies, media studies, sociology, and popular culture research, giving readers the tools to continue Lieb's analysis. Beyond this, the work offers practical views on marketing, branding, and public relations. Those working with and for pop stars may also benefit from the author's careful analysis of various case studies, resulting in ready-to-apply lessons for managers or potential sponsors. For these reasons, Lieb's book is a must-read for any critical consumer wanting to look under the hood of the Western corporate music industry. Just be prepared to find plenty of dirty mechanisms that make this machine run.

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### **In It for the Long Run: A Musical Odyssey**

JIM ROONEY

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014

ISBN: 978-0-252-07981-8

352 pp., \$24.95 (pb)

A number of books deal with various aspects of the folk music revival in America. They include historical works, biographies, and memoirs. The authors include music historians, folklorists, and performers. Jim Rooney has a unique perspective because he is an experienced performer and record producer with a variety of other musical credits.

Rooney's memoir encompasses details of his personal life as well as colorful descriptive material about the various music scenes that he has traversed and inhabited. Rooney was brought up in suburban Boston and went to private schools. Later he became a classics studies student at Amherst. After graduation he continued at Harvard, was a teaching fellow, and won a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship. He was then awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to study in Greece. As a teenager he had performed on local radio programs, and during his academic career Rooney juggled his studies with music performances, notably with fellow Amherst student banjoist Bill Keith as well as the sons of renowned bluegrass musician Everett Lilly. In 1963, Keith and Rooney recorded an LP for Prestige Records called *Livin' on the Mountain*.