HOW TO MAKE YOUR WIFE LISTEN: THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN MUSIC TECHNOLOGY PUBLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT
The manner in which women have been both portrayed and addressed in advertising relating to audio and music technology has witnessed a vast and yet subtle transformation throughout modern history. Our research traces the framework under which women have been employed, marketed to, and exploited in the primary corpus of popular and consumer audio and music technology publications, indicating a trend that parallels the Women’s Movement.

1. INTRODUCTION
When Pauline Oliveros wrote her now-famous article “And Don’t Call Them ‘Lady’ Composers” in 1970, she asserted, “In part, talent, education, ability, interests, motivation [for a woman to become a composer] were irrelevant because being female was a unique qualification for domestic work and for continual obedience to and dependence upon me.”

The history of women in computer and electronic music, and the related fields of engineering and sound recording, is long and varied. Despite advances in the sheer numbers of women in fields involving music technology, the manner in which women have historically been portrayed in advertisements has quite often been offensive or even reprehensible to many readers.

We here show general trends in the manners in which women have been depicted in professional and consumer publications over the last half century. We were fortunate to have a near complete set of High Fidelity magazines (1958–1989) for research. Other prominent “prosumer” magazines such as Mix Magazine, Electronic Musician, Remix, Pro Sound News, EQ, Keyboard (formerly Contemporary Keyboard) are discussed herein.

2. CATEGORIES

This current study of High Fidelity dating back to 1958 acknowledges that typically masculine imagery is abundant in these types of publications, but the way in which women have been portrayed historically in music technology publications tends to fall into three broader areas: (1) seemingly “humorous” advertisements with sexual overtones aimed at male audience members; (2) advertisements with sexual overtones that are directed toward either men or women; and (3) advertisements that are sexually explicit, overtly sexist, discriminatory, or potentially offensive to most women and men.

By way of introduction, the following figures present graphic examples of these categorizations. The advertisement in Figure 1 depicts a woman lovingly caressing a speaker cabinet with “a promise of perfection fulfilled.” Figure 2 illustrates an attempt by one manufacturer to anthropomorphize LP records as women in “7 Ways to Make Love to Your Records.” The advertisement includes such suggestions as “Take ‘Em for a Spin,” “Give ’Em Diamonds,” “Take ’Em on a Trip,” “Give ’Em a Home,” “Be Protective,” “Be Adaptable,” and “Give ’Em Fur.” Finally, the material in Figure 3 was simply gratuitous in the use of a female model clad in a white bustier and leather boots.
3. **ANALYSIS**

The manner in which women have been used in advertisements has roughly paralleled aspects of the Feminist Movement and the Sexual Revolution. In the 1950s, women in music-technology advertising were largely “seen but unseen.” That is, while they were present in the publications, women were mainly used as background models. Captions focused on male readers, and female models were used to enhance the aesthetic beauty of the product and presumably to convince the readers and their wives that spending the extra money on audio equipment was a rational purchase (Figure 4). Texts that accompanied advertisements during this period often solidified the general view that women were primarily interested in fashion and modeling.

In the 1960s, advertisements continued this trend, but women were now were seen as wife and mother. At that time, purchasing new audio equipment was a family affair (Figure 5).
Despite the Women’s Movement and Sexual Revolution of the 1970s, women were overtly portrayed as sexual objects referentially in text and visually in photographs and cartoons. For example, in *High Fidelity*, November 1971, the following advertisement for the Rectilinear III Lowboy Loudspeaker appeared:

So, for an extra $20, we turned the Rectilinear III into a stunning lowboy and added a magnificent fretwork grill. In this $299 version it has true visceral appeal, more like a luscious mistress than a handsome wife.

*High Fidelity*’s “Going 4 channel” advertisement (Figure 6) shows four nude women surrounding a set of four loudspeakers. Interestingly, this exact ad first appeared one month earlier also in *High Fidelity*, but in the original advertisement, all four women were fully clothed.

By the 1980s, women all but disappeared from most advertisements. Ironically, the 1990s reached an all-time low in the exploitation and sexually charged use of women in music technology advertisements. For example, the “Hand(s) Job” ad that appeared in the October 1995 *Keyboard* used a not-so-subtle font change encouraging male readers to “get a grip…[and] get your hands out of your pockets and do the right thing…it’s a real handful.” (See Figure 7.)

The April 1995 *Keyboard* included an advertisement that featured a sadomasochistic, smiley-faced female with large breasts and erect nipples selling Hollywood Edge sample compact discs (Figure 8).

The advertisement was apparently so offensive to both male and female readers that many letters were generated over the next couple of months, including the following two examples:
...Sure, sex sells, but I wonder how your male readers would react to a full-page shot of some guy’s balls maximized by a pair of compression shorts.

I simply must express my disappointment, anger, and dismay at the Hollywood Edge ad that you allowed on page 40 of your Apr. ’95 issue. It is very hurtful and demeaning to women. Ads like this are even frightening to some women, since we have been exploited so badly in so many ways. Please do not allow cheap ads in your book. Please do not publish what could be painful for women. Please, no more!

In the “From the Editor” column, the editor addressed the issue of the offensive advertisement by saying:

While Keyboard reserves the right to refuse ads that are untrue or blatantly offensive, as a practical matter we’re not in the business of telling advertisers what sort of imagery is appropriate to depict their products. We prefer to let our readers formulate and express their own views on these and similar subjects. Presumably, advertisers choose provocative images with an understanding that they attract some negative reaction and adverse comment....

In its 2002 campaign, Ex’pression New Media, an educational institution devoted to multimedia and recording arts, ran an advertisement suggesting that readers “Spend a week with your favorite band without sleeping with the lead singer.” In the body of the text, this academic institution suggested that they “want you to do what you love. And to feel great about it the following morning” (Figure 9). Interestingly, the institution purports to “to ensure that staff and students thrive in a positive and nurturing environment.”

4. CONCLUSION

With roughly 4% of the current population of electro-acoustic musicians being women, younger students and professionals are perhaps left to believe that the field is largely closed to women unless they fulfill the subservient role to their male counterparts.

Fortunately, there are many fine resources that offer support and positive role models, both female and male, to young computer musicians (e.g., [1], [2], [3]).

5. REFERENCES


