

What the hell am I (and who the hell cares)?
by Neko Case
June 5, 2015

Hello, nice to meet you! If you don't know why you are reading this, my name is Neko Case. I am an American musician. I get interviewed and asked many questions. Some are too hard to answer in a few sentences, or 140 characters à la Twitter, and sometimes they simply distract from what I want to discuss: the music. MUSIC is my job.

This essay consists of my own opinions; it's not for publication, copying or paraphrasing. It is a sort of semi-complete "thought in progress". Here I want to write about my own personal kind of feminism and my feelings towards references to "Women in_____". You are invited to read it if you want. It's going to be very long and I'll talk about the specifics of my own career, rather than world politics or ending poverty. Not that these subjects aren't deserving of a ll our attention, but I am just not qualified to tackle them by myself in one essay. I don't want you to think I mind going off-topic in my daily life outside of music to shoot the shit about most things but, as a topic, "woman" is a little too deep for brevity. As a woman, I am an expert on the subject, alongside that of not really feeling like a woman at all.

Be warned, I never passed English 101 and I can't spell for shit. I'm faking it. But I'm smart enough; somewhere between an albatross and Herodotus. There is no test to gauge how smart: I don't know and neither do you. My background can be categorized as "fighty, drinky, poor people"; in other words, the majority of the population of the First, Second and Third worlds. Look for no Nobel Prize material here. Alright, let's get to it.

In the world of media, social and otherwise, I'm often criticized for things I say, which is normal for someone with a big mouth. However, I don't take for granted that people sometimes pay attention, nor do I wish to do doughnuts all over their opinions with my ego-hotrod (although I'm not always the model of restraint.). I am truly grateful for people's attention and regard, and I don't take it lightly. Mutual respect is a glorious natural resource.

Several months ago (OK, a little over a year ago in May, 2014) I was midway through a chunk of a LONG tour cycle and I was having a rough couple weeks. One afternoon, things were particularly tense, and as I sat in the fragrant basement band room, I thought; "Hey, maybe there is a cute-animal photo-war happening on Twitter? That would be a nice, tiny vacation from myself". But instead of something gropable-fuzzy, I came across this.



Playboy.com @PlayboyDotCom · May 21

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My blood boiled and I responded with rage.



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Was I wrong? Nope. Am I sorry? Nope.

Do I owe Playboy dot com writer, Tim Grierson, an apology? Yes, I do (I am a gentleman, after all).

How can all these things be true?

Well, it's a decades-old question/problem that I promise not to try to solve here. Instead, I would like to offer a sincere "sorry" to Tim Grierson (who was being kind and didn't even write the Twitter tag line that made me so pissed). But also, I would like to NOT apologize for the substance of my reaction to the statement "What women in rock should be", and maybe ask a few questions myself. Just to be clear, if I had wanted to start an ideological fight/discussion/attack/rant about feminism in the media, I wouldn't have gone after Playboy dot com, as it is too easy a target. They feature naked ladies with manscaped clams, so "duh". Instead, I'm going to throw it out to the entire universe. A positive, casual, in-your-jammies, speakeasy where everyone is invited; ladies, dudes, LGBT, every race, creed, color of person, you (you too, Playboy dot com!), and everyone gets to be right. Cool!

I am asked frequently in interviews about my relationship with feminism and, over the years, I have tried to be consistent in my responses. However, I've never nailed it, and I'm sure I won't now. This bothers me. Feminism and I haven't always gotten along but now we are the same guy. Together, we make a complete human organism who poops and pees and is wrong a lot; in other words, one that is functioning at a high-normal, healthy capacity, where all systems are "go". I figured out I need balance in all things to be healthy and productive, and that's where feminism has been very helpful; I can better govern the male AND female parts of myself without looking to other people or my society/culture to do it for me. This isn't to say that they can't help though, and, in turn, I can try to help right back. Voila: give and take. It's not so much an end goal as a constant exercise that reminds me to live in the here and now where I have every right to be, as long as I share it with you, and vice versa.

I'm not being paid for this and no one has put me up to it. Selfishly, I am doing this in part so I never again have to answer the question of "How is it to be a woman in rock?" Instead, I can direct people here for the full, thoughtful answer. "Women in rock" is The Topic That Will Not Die, no matter how hard I wish it would, which makes some people ask me "Why? Isn't it a good thing?" The short answer is "no" because I want to be in the future of full human equality right now. I already FEEL equal, so what's the fucking hold up? I am going to be as honest as I can here, which will be embarrassing and icky at times, but that's my headache. I'm also gonna seem ungrateful, sappy, petty, and ranty here and there, but I just want to spell out a realistic human 360. Values aren't created in a vacuum, they are made from messy efforts.

There are three solid reasons for my discomfort in discussing my personal views on feminism. Number one: for a very long time, and even now, I'm not really working to be recognized for my feminist ways, but as a songwriter, producer, singer and musician. Do I deserve it? Am I talented? That's a matter of opinion, but I am experienced enough to weigh in on the music business and the matter of running your own business in general. I do not hesitate to claim straight-up ownership for that. I work like a maniac. I have a lot to prove (to myself, of which I'm not proud, but I really want to be a truly great musician someday) and I'm probably a workaholic (also more a problem than an overused joke). I employ a number of people, all of whom I care about, both in and outside of our job. With the help of other talented humans, I run an economy within a larger economy. It's surreal, but I'm proud of us. We don't fuck people to get what we

need. I hardly go home, I don't have much of a life, but that's my choice. It's a sometimes dysfunctional, but feminist victory nonetheless. My reluctance to speak about my role as a "woman in rock" has been more about pointing out my work ethic than my niche vagina. My professional heart frequently yells, "Can we discuss my love of an SSL mixing console or Pops Staples' guitar tone now, please?" I want to be ABOUT MUSIC.

And let's face it, "women in rock" are no longer an anomaly. Thank every star in the sky and Hallelujah for that! The fact that this has happened in my lifetime is a fucking gift and a triumph that I think about and am thankful for every single goddamn day. Girls AND boys see ladies of every stripe playing every kind of music eight ways from Sunday and it's normal. Do we need more? Fuck, yes we do! Are we done here? No way! All flavors! I can die now, and I don't say that lightly! I want all of us to be able to drown in the varieties of humans. We are magic motherfuckers when we wanna be. I truly love us.

The second reason I am hesitant to talk about my own feminism is the interview format. Consequently, there are no guarantees that your personal passion won't come off as idiotic, mean, entitled, or worse. Here, I'm going to explain things that may seem rudimentary, but a lot of people aren't aware of them and they are really important. Please bear with me. Merci!

Most interviews are recorded, transcribed and then edited at a later stage. I emphasize heavily the word "edited". Your words in another person's hands can become cut-and-paste Xeroxes of your thoughts that no longer resemble your original intention. Don't get me wrong, most people aren't looking to discredit you, make you look dumb or twist your meaning; but let's face it, you're not going to be the focus of an entire newspaper or magazine, so they have to make you fit their special limitations.

The author of a piece is usually a different person from the editor. Writers may want to talk about many things with you because they are genuinely interested, which often makes them really good at their job. They then write their article based on what they took away from the conversation and/or their research, most likely punctuated with isolated quotes provided by you, the subject.

Next, the editor comes along, maybe takes things out, moves some other things around, adds a headline and highlights the pull-quotes. And there you have the published article, a third and sometimes fourth generation from what you intended to say as the interviewee. This is also reasonable, as you know it will be this way. Sometimes interviews are transcribed and published verbatim, but they are rare as the Dodo, which we all know is extinct.

Obviously, my point here is that you may end up feeling, at best, like the publication is spot-on, really gets what you were saying and was right there with you; and at worst, anywhere from a watered-down, pussy version of yourself to a racist snuff-cult evangelist who stomps baby chicks to death. If you want to speak publicly regarding something you care deeply about, these aren't risks you are eager to take, no matter how brave you think you are. Who wants to be misunderstood or misquoted about something they consider so important? Nobody.

Please understand, I'm not bagging on writers or editors. Their jobs are important and crucial to someone like me who travels from place to place in a band and makes records that are reviewed. We need each other. Where would artists be if there weren't talented writers who give enough of a shit to tell folks we made a record, a sculpture, wrote a book, ran for office, and so

on and so on to infinity, and make it sound interesting in one to five paragraphs?! It's hard! We are in it together. Thank you, journalists!

Also, my aforementioned caution regarding the interview format has sometimes morphed into spouting politically-correct stock lines and overly-neutral phrases meant to not exclude anyone, resulting in them just sounding, to me, passionless, flavorless and safe. Things get all "psuedo-politigenderizing messy-mess-mess". No wonder people get tired of hearing about change when it sounds so Stepford sometimes! After a while, the same words and dogmatic phrases don't sound like they are coming from real people, so our eyes and ears can easily start tuning them out. When we become numb to the message we get lazy, and when we use other people's words over and over, we become uninspired and lose the spark and urgency we had in the first place. When we try to "ban" other people's words, we risk becoming control-freaks who are wasting our focus. Not everyone has thought to say; "Hey, what would MY voice sound like representing my own passion?" I'm guilty of not asking myself this and I'm supposed to be a songwriter. Yeesh.

I have come around quite late to this way of thinking, but therein lies the beauty; it's never too late to start. You aren't late for anything if you start now or two years from now. There are no rules, and this is our job as citizens and artists and parents and passion-havers of all kinds; we need to change the language, and keep changing it perpetually. We need to keep it exciting, inspiring, inviting and inclusive, and ringing like fresh bells in peoples' ears. The English language is SPENDY! Wring it out! It feels good!

Who am I to say these things? The jury is still out, but I think the answer is; "A human currently living who possesses the curse of self-awareness". I don't think of myself as a "woman" much, which is the third reason for my reticence on the topic of feminism. Physically, I am a woman, but my gender doesn't dominate my thoughts or passions every waking moment. I feel like I'm a mixture of all kinds of people and sexes we don't even know about yet, and I like it that way. That doesn't mean I don't love to my core the women of this planet. I would defend them to the death. I feel the same about men, and I want all of them to have the freedom to think of themselves in the same way I do; which is, "whatever I feel like". I'm not gonna lie, it's pretty choice. Get ON this dance floor.

I'm not talking about sex, I'm talking about remembering that we are made of cells and technically we are animals, which is fucking cool. We are mammals! Warm milk for everyone! What if we started thinking of ourselves as *Homo sapiens*? Like a nature show? It's akin to using the word "lion" for all lions, female and male; not strange at all. It makes sense and there's no need to worry about political correctness or leaving people out. We can just omit extraneous "Mizz" and "Sirs" and whatnot. In the eyes of the law and the universe, we are "men". This is not practical at the doctor when getting a physical and other biological exams per se, but it works for most things.

Now, I know not all people are going to get fully on board with my idea for using the word "man" and with good reason. Language is a powerful dye that colors everything we think about ourselves and others. Even subtle language can make or break your identity and self-esteem. I asked many people to whom I look up and admire for their hearts and brains to read this essay and give me feedback as I was writing it, and they made very valuable and helpful comments. My friend Jacinta Bunnell, for example, is a great artist and teacher and all round terrifically

intelligent person. She had this to say, and I think she is right:

“Maybe it’s time to start talking about gender as a spectrum instead of a dichotomy. I understand what you are saying about MEN or MANKIND as a word to describe the human animal but there was/still is a long fight to change our language so that it is more inclusive. We now say humankind instead of mankind, we say flight attendant instead of stewardess, mail carrier instead of mailman, songwriter has replaced songstress, comedienne has become comedian, etc. Our first female president better not be called Presidentress! Activists fight hard for inclusive language because words are so powerful and can influence people to think and act differently. I want gender neutrality as the norm! YES! But returning to MAN as the word to include all of us reverses us to a place of exclusivity. Because when those science textbooks were written and our species was catalogued as MAN, women and other genders were not being studied or considered.”

Yes. She nailed it. As “esses” and “ettes”, and being “of” men, women have been relegated to a sub-species; not quite important enough for medicine and a million other things. That’s not OK. It never was. What a vast fucking waste of centuries. I am in agreement.

As an individual, however, I talk in a meandering, casual way that isn’t always all-encompassing in its pronouns. My public and private personae are pretty similar so I’m always trying to ask myself; “How can I make room for everyone and still sound like me, using this patriarchy-heavy language I literally cut my teeth on, yet not lean on politically-correct place-holders to which I have a hard time relating?”

Gender awareness and degrees of acceptance have changed intensely in my short lifetime. They are now leaning towards something more positive, which is truly a great thing. So with reverence for that monumental change and its ever-building momentum, I will be trying my damndest and practicing forever how I communicate my role in it; balancing the old and the new words, trying to make something nutritious AND tasty out of all this consideration and history. I look forward to transitioning into a newer, all-encompassing version of this beautiful language (English, the only language I can claim to “know”). I want to move gracefully through speech and still feel like my imperfect, informal, pajama-self, which is how I want you to know me; as a close friend, a musician or a stranger whom you may never know. I want it to be obvious that I honor and admire people I will never meet who have fought for me without ever knowing of my existence. Intent is powerful. My personal approach to feminism isn’t meant to be a contradiction, but rather a way to make it my own and encourage other people to do likewise. It’s an open invitation.

As far as changing language in the name of moving forward, I’m fully on board. But I’m also so arrogantly “here right now and alive” I feel totally comfortable delving back into history, dangling a toe in the oily water, and making those he-tilted words and concepts “yours, mine, and ours” retroactively. I want to be King, not Queen. It’s a way of thinking that I highly recommend. I don’t feel “entitled” to reclaim the word “man” so much as I am jumping off a cliff for it. I didn’t know what I had to lose until I tested it, and it has been nothing but expansive for my heart and soul. It may sound part delusion/part visualization, and perhaps it is, but it’s working for me. I genuinely believe humans can become better animals that make this world more livable. You’ll find that some people LOVE to crap on this notion, but that’s their problem. I don’t want to waste any more time giving a shit about how cool-looking or “uniform” my optimism is or isn’t. I’m even OK

with adjectives that act as triggers for many people in the here and now; for example, I don't flinch at being called "aggressive" or "bossy". I am a boss, at work and in my own life, and I have always been aggressive about survival, in both life and music. No one was going to get those things done *for* me. I don't look on these words as attributes per se, but neither have I used them for evil. I also understand fully and support why some people DON'T want those words attached to themselves, or especially their kids. This is their right and it should be respected.

Now, who are "the Feminists" about whom the people are talking, officially? Suffragettes? Gloria Steinem? Jim Henson? Rosa Parks? My friend Rick who gave me my first drum kit? Bikini Kill? Angela Davis? Wilma Mankiller? Angela Carter? Alice Walker? Sojourner Truth? Anita Hill? Pearl S. Buck? My step-dad? The right answer, of course, is "all of thee above", in addition to a shit-ton of women, men, organizations, cliques, students, individuals, HUMANS! There isn't one core group that sticks out, I found: it seems to be a bunch of self-aware folks, mostly women, some in clumps and some alone, who (to whatever extremes) think everyone should get their fair shake. Many motives and many methods. Some on purpose, some by accident. Some are loud and agitating, which is annoying to many, but it's one of the hardest and least popular type of change-maker to be. They are the alarm and then the snooze-alarm. We can't forget to keep practicing this change for everyone. Amen to that! Thank you for your energy and passion, agitators! Some feminists are teachers, some are helpers, defenders and reminders, and some just gently let people be themselves. All are needed. We especially need more men feeling invited and helping out. Come over, guys; we LOVE you!

Another stumbling point for me has been THE question; "Would you call yourself a feminist?" Which often sounds like, "You in or you out?!" The way some people asked it felt a little like a threat, and I have seen quite a few really shitty, unwarranted take-downs and/or dismissals based on who was asking. Some "askers" thought people's beliefs were stupid and some felt the answers were not sufficiently militant or hardline. Others simply interpreted feminism as straight-up "man hating", which hurts like crazy. Some of the most inspiring feminists in my life have been men! (One just handed me an English muffin so I could keep crankin' on this essay...)

So, I felt like there wasn't gonna be a right answer for this guy. It seemed like a bit of a trap. Luckily, I was wrong and there are really only right answers if you stop worrying so hard about what other people think. I just wanted to help, after all. I just decided not to try to sum it up for anyone in 3 sentences anymore. I'm just trying to improve my way of "living it".

My search for a personal definition of feminism has been daunting at times, simply because some of the harshest critics of feminism are self-proclaimed feminists. It's one thing if some idiot says "Are you on yer period?", and another completely when someone for whom you'd fight rips you a new one and verbally tries to kick you out of ladyhood. (Don't worry, it isn't possible, this shit ain't a club.) In this charged arena, lots of great discussions are started and solutions found, but sometimes people who supposedly want the same thing as you can just be downright mean. These people can make me feel like the buffet counter at the Donner Party Easter brunch, but I try to remember that everyone is right sometimes and many of the harshest testifiers are young people who don't yet know how to focus their rage. It's huge and painful and they haven't formed their feelings and passions into a controlled laser for cutting out cancer just yet. When I was young, I wanted all hardship and injustice to be as simple as "good versus evil", which is

pretty normal, I think. If I can help by being the cadaver students practice on at medical school, so be it. I'm OK with that. (However, this is a good place to insert the cardinal rule; "Never read the comments".) I try to remind myself that honoring the works of the amazing humans who gave their hearts, souls, blood, sweat, genius, jail time, and even their LIVES so women could occupy an equal place in this world is far more important than any personal discomfort I may feel in fighting/living for what I believe. I have no doubt they want us to move forward with great light. So, yes, I AM a proud feminist with a capital "F". It's the neck tattoo I can live with.

At this point, I have to give credit and thanks to the women I have met here in rural Vermont; they have cemented my instinct to fight for equality for everyone. When I moved here, I didn't realize how narrow my band of friends was in regards to the age spectrum. In more urban settings, I think I gravitated subconsciously towards my own age group; they were so plentiful! Here in Vermont, there are way fewer people, and I have befriended a very dynamic group of women spanning seven generations. They hail from all over the world and all walks of life. They have been invaluable in sharing their thoughts on feminism and the state of humanity regarding politics and a million other things. I can't recommend enough that curious people ASK these awesome folks of older and younger generations for their stories. You gain a perspective on what was/is hype and what is not; what has been forgotten as if it never happened; and, most importantly and inspiringly, what HAS changed.

It's also important to remind older generations that their experiences are really valuable. My good friend, who is 85, once provided the disclaimer at the end of a great story, that she was "old and her story was a little outdated". I was shocked! "No way!" You came through World War II, via Hungary and Nazi Germany to the United States as a human being and a woman! We NEED your opinions and perspectives! She and the other women I have met are so smart and open-minded, and there are millions like them. "Democrat" and "Republican" don't mean a goddamn thing. Please ask them! Men and women. You'll be so glad you did. Remind a valuable person that their times, troubles and joys can help us still. Our elders rule!

As a kid growing up in the 70s, my co-parent, along with two dogs and a space heater, was PBS Television where the mantra was; "You can be anything you want, kid". It was my religion and I'm sticking with it. I'm equal NOW. If a situation arises where I don't feel like I'm being treated as such, I talk it out, fight it out or get my ass handed to me; whatever it takes.

Like all of us, I was a kid who grew up in motion, in the post-Industrial Revolution era, born into dangerous momentum that we didn't start. A momentum that keeps raging out of the progress sluice faster and meaner every day. All these ideas and feelings are often confusing. You don't have to know exactly how you feel right this second. Make mistakes and own them. There's no shame in trying to do something good, for others or just for you, and not getting it quite right the first (or fifth) time. Technology and human populations fork, divide and multiply, *Sorcerer's Apprentice*-style, at the speed of light. It's good and bad and everything in between, which IS nature. Needless to say, nature isn't waiting around for the tiny humans to understand or catch up, so we have to be responsible for ourselves. But we should also cut ourselves a little slack when our intentions are good.

However, catalytic solar flares also exist in nature. In my short life, I have seen women's status rise and fall in sharp points, but mostly on an upward trajectory. Yes! Women's status equates to human status, and it's good for all of us. This change flies in the face our human history; WE

changed a 200,000-year course, and we need to keep that momentum going our way. I'm the kid in the back seat going, "Are we there yet?!" I need to be there NOW, Mister History, or I'm going to piss myself in an ambitious, creative freak-out. I'm post-arrival.

I frequently ask myself; "What do I OWN and what do I OWE?" These two questions are related so closely they are almost interchangeable. I can be pissed that a Playboy dot com employee wrote a clumsy, thoughtless tagline, but I can't yell to the world; "Are you fucking kidding me?!" if I ignore the bigger question of "Why the hell do I care about a seemingly tiny thing as "Women in _____?" What sort of rabbit hole am avoiding if I don't dig deeper? The dots do connect, but not so simply as to fit neatly within a brief sketch (as you can tell by the length of this essay). My reaction to Playboy was exactly that; a reaction. It had been building, and that particular sentence tipped me over the brink at the right (or wrong) moment. However, the fact remains; I was already saturated.

As far as media goes, Playboy isn't alone in using the term "women in rock" or "women in _____"; not by a long shot. Everyone does, including women. I'm guilty too. Sometimes it's used very specifically, which is good if people are looking to research or be inspired by a something precise, but 9 times out of 10 it's unnecessary. I'm not so cool I can't admit to contradicting myself though, as nothing is that clear-cut. The phrase "women in _____" can be used for good.

History, musicology, sociology, gender studies, and a million other areas of research would be impossible without valuable, meticulously collected and compiled "women in _____" data. It is totally valid and helpful to people, especially people like the forever hopeful, teenage idealist me, who can't help but still be livid at things so stupid as the popularity contests featured in music publications, such as "Best rock guitar players in history", which virtually ignore women. Their omission seems a glaring slap-in-the-face when you consider that women like Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Maybelle Carter were PIONEERS of the genre. The latter's "Carter scratch" was a foundation of rock n' roll guitar playing and on-and-on for days, but that's a conversation for another day.. Mighty Maybelle and the dynamic, exciting Sister Rosetta deserve more than gender sidebar walk-on roles in the history of music. They are fucking CREATORS. Period. As are so many other women who've worked their asses off to play music and elevate their lives to art. Their past and future protégés shouldn't have to be archaeologists to find them either, but I have felt like one looking for "the women" in music a million times.

Yes, the lists are really important in that context. However, my overall point is that, at this period in time, there are now more than enough of us ladies "in rock" to let the current "women in _____" list-making fall by the wayside and let the people just take them on the merits of their talent and musical expression. We are neither a novelty nor a niche market. We deserve post-arrival status. There's plenty of time for lists, but wouldn't it be cool if they called out the gender melting-pot as "Musicians?" THAT would be a fitting tribute to the massive backlog of listed greats, whatever their gender may have been.

As a young person, I felt really down (and still do) about women on the covers of popular rock mags (when they even make the cover) being pushed towards the "sexy" angle, and women in advertising spreads for musicians' gear, if they were there at all, usually striking stupid, contorted poses, with tight, shiny bikinis strangling their crotches. No wonder they weren't playing the equipment! They were trying to smile while lycra garroted their mons! Spando-

cauterized nerve endings and neon high heels mountain goats couldn't stand up in. (If you don't believe me you've never been to the 80s. Spandex is not as "sexy" or as yeast-prohibitive as American Apparel would have you believe.) My groin ligament spasms as I remember the days of pussy-binding.

The TV and pop culture sexualization of my youth in the 80s wasn't meant FOR me, it just translated to terrible fashion I would try, and fail, to emulate. It was pretty much the only "window to the world" available to me in the slummy, one-horse towns I moved around to, so I couldn't really avoid it (not to mention the other end of the fashion spectrum girls were rockin' in 1982 was a preppy-asshole-polo-shirt-Mrs. Doubtfire amalgam that I refused to embrace. Fuck YOU, seersucker blouse with shoulder-pads!)

Having absolutely no money and a ghost-parent didn't help my attempt at puberty. I thought I must be a tiny, wiggling shadow of a sham of a version of the grotesque cartoons that were supposed to be glamorous, cigarette-eating rock n' roll adults who, after all that makeup and hair-spraying, finally played music. Therefore, I wanted to be like them? Yes, I think? I was deeply frustrated and confused, but I stayed glued to pop culture because I was obsessed with music. Unfortunately though, the women weren't playing much music on MTV. The she-math was grinding in my brain. Thank god for the occasional oasis of the Pretenders, Sheila E, Grace Jones, Blondie, Joan Jett and Martha Quinn.

Mentally and legally, I was a kid in the 80s, looking for ANY version of female-me on TV, in magazines and on the radio. I also wanted to be present in music and art: to prove it was possible. It was the crucial time every kid experiences where I was racing towards becoming myself. "My" and "self" were about to meld into one word and there would be no going back, I thought. I was trying to make sense of what I was gonna have to pay to get there, to be an "adult". It all added up to what looked like a fat wallet of humiliation to me and, needless to say, I couldn't rally much confidence from that visual moving forward. Having no parents to guide me through these big questions was counterproductive, I'm sure. Sadly, I'll never really know, even now, what I missed or what I really needed at that time. There's a mystery gap at the spot in my brain that feels like when your foot falls asleep but is slightly more sinister; it's a grey hum. I remember worrying really hard about becoming an adult, as all kids do (it was gonna happen any second! Like being hit by a bus!). But I couldn't get so far as to imagine becoming one I could respect, let alone one who could hope to make something like art. Becoming an adult looked to me like a steaming car wreck ahead.

Then at some hovering, transitional place before "grown up", I started seeing real, live women playing music more often, mostly in local clubs. To my horror and surprise, I was filled with bitter resentment for most of them and I would pick at the tiniest fault I could fabricate from nothing. I felt like I actually hated them for it. It all felt like a sinister plot to do the creative thing I desperately wanted to do WITHOUT ME IN IT!!! What the bejesus was happening?! I felt like Augustus Gloop in the chocolate tube with millipedes crawling all over me! (I don't remember if it happens like that in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* but that's my childhood snapshot take-away and it's terrifying.) I was being consumed by envy.

At the beginning of this phase, I had no one to tell me I was jealous and needed to turn it around. I needed a "Snap out of it, man!" slap in the face. I had no idea how to start being in a band from scratch, and this was the "do or die" alarm. I was an embarrassing asshole about

these women who were making it happen. Thank goodness I eventually found patient friends who helped me figure it out. It's funny now, but what if I had never figured it out? Yikes.

I don't want this to happen to any of you reading this. If you are feeling crazy jealous of someone else's work or success, it's your wake-up call to start being your own kind of workhorse genius who fails at some shit. It seems hard for a second but it will reward the fuck out of you. I gradually found my way, and I have a very vivid memory of my body taking hold of me and walking me up to a young woman musician I'd seen and telling her how sorry I was that I misjudged her. I really meant it and I felt shaky and high from finally being honest. Luckily for me, she was really kind and understood. She graciously let me apologize and let go. Maybe I had a will after all? After that, it wasn't so hard to tap into the sense of community that was so alive and positive amongst the young people who played music and made art. It was a hot battery that never ran out of juice.

Teenage and early 20s me smashed a lot of fists and raged in private (and later in public) about the universal bikini stand-in for a "lady musician" who, if she exists, just plays the guitar and doesn't look like a panting Pomeranian jackass doing it. The position was screaming to be filled. My brain wailed "injustice!" a large proportion of the time. A mix of art school and "Injustice!" sent me rebelling joyfully into a band of three women that wore fuzzy bikinis. Yes, we wore them ironically and they looked more like big, fuzzy diapers than swimwear. In my mind it was anti-sexy but, to be honest, we were pretty adorable. We would have had no idea about that then, especially since we were scrappy ladies from various shitty parts of the world who would fist-fight anyone. Not that we didn't want to look cool whilst playing rock music. We learned everything in that band and we worked hard! It was a triumph of teamwork, regardless of whether or not anyone liked our music. It didn't matter. WE liked our band and we knew we had a right to play, onstage, in public like anyone else. We grew in self-confidence and, since it was fun, I don't think we noticed the transitions until later. Since it was fun, people actually came to see us play. I owe those women, as well as all the other people who supported us. I'm so proud to have played with them. I learned a lot about gratitude too, which is probably the most useful tool in the toolbox. I know for a fact I'm still using for good the momentum created during that time of my life.

Still, today, as a full-on card carrying adult, in regards to the representation of sexuality, I've lost count of how many times I've yelled inside or out loud; "Ladies are ALWAYS naked! Why don't dudes have their dicks out too?! It's not even! Am I supposed to cover all my flesh in protest?! Should I be embarrassed of these boobs? Men have been branching out into make-up and dresses since the 60s, so why can't we "branch out" into guitar and presidents?!"

I continue to be harassed by these thoughts. While I usually laugh about them now, they remain completely valid. I'm not remotely opposed to sexuality, brazen or otherwise, as long as everyone is in agreement, has decided of their own free will to do it and it's not ALL there is to choose from, for crying out loud! I am an expressive animal after all. I believe in the right to let one's freak flag fly, which makes it doubly alarming when a puritan genie flies out of my ass and shrieks in my face. Back in the bottle, you creep! I just want there to be an equal ratio of boobs to dicks. Is that too much to ask?

I'm still mad about how popular culture makes people feel. Sometimes it seems worse than it's ever been. To this day, I do that tiny, grating prison-math; it never ceases! If I knew how to get it out, I would. And yes, it's SO DUMB and, again, so obvious; however, my burning contempt for

what's unspoken and pretty much expected of women feels anything but. It feels like bad PCP, and that's the honest truth. I too expect the slender, sexy, white lady on the box to sell me what I need! I'm confused without her sometimes! Heart of fucking darkness already! I need to lift a school bus over my head and throw it through a department store display window to quench this spiritual heartburn over not being invited unless I doll-up or strip down. My ribs clench and I spit through my teeth; "We haven't managed to kill off the eggs of this sexist, racist lice YET?! For fuck's SAKE!" All I can do is reset and continue trying, and attempt to channel some Dionne Warwick when she demands in that gorgeous song, "Don't make me over..." I'm fucking great. Just. Like. This.

All this may seem trivial and even way outdated to some folks, but the 80s weren't long ago; I'm not even close to old yet. Considering the scope of how quickly things have been changing since the Industrial Revolution, it's quite remarkable. This feels like flattened-to-the-walls-of-a-centrifuge fast. These days, most people are aware that women can actually PLAY the instruments, and even be GREAT. This mass revelation has nothing to do with luck either. A LOT of humans worked hard above and below the radar to turn it around. Don't ever let anyone say you are "lucky" to be who you are trying to be, musician or otherwise. That's what maintains the myths of "Hollywood sexy" and "Major labels know what's best". It's not science; these kinds of ideas/problems/traps are the itchy seeds that make me want to make pictures and sounds that speak to other humans. I don't always need to know "why", I just want to be a part of us. I do believe that is "Art."

As for the rest of pop culture beyond music, it's way more grim; or is it just more contradictory? I was interviewed recently for a popular fashion magazine and I had a fantastic conversation with the writer. It was all about passion and music. He called to say the interview went so well the magazine wanted to make it into a larger feature. I was thrilled! I felt that he and I really connected, so it meant a lot. It was the first time I'd had the nerve to talk openly to a journalist about going through serious depression and trying to do my job. I felt it was an important topic to talk about and the journalist was so helpful and respectful.

Since it had grown into a feature, I would have to do a photo shoot in Los Angeles. OK! It took a whole day and they spared no expense. It felt funny to me, having been a grubby, poor kid, but it was their thing and I had agreed. After all, this publication is an institution that has been around long enough for me to be born and die several times over. So, despite hating wearing lots of makeup and getting my photo taken, I thought; "It's what they are known for! It will be fun, like going in drag! Go with it, you pussy!"

On the day of the shoot, I got along well with the photo crew and makeup crew (who were all women, and most of the clothes and makeup I wore were designed by women; awesome!) and we had a good time. Happy ending! Or so I thought.

A few months later, it was time for "my issue" to hit the stands. I was excited to see how the interview turned out and what the photos looked like. I felt like a little kid! In a good way! It was nice to take a break from feeling so jaded about "dressing up", especially after so many years in the entertainment industry, which is a harsh bitch of a monster on its meaner days; particularly in relation to the least important of our human qualities - appearance. I actually allowed myself to feel a little special.

As I flipped through “my issue” I felt a little cloud gathering over my head; “Why wasn’t it here?” I called the appropriate parties to see if it had been moved. Nope. The editor “hated the photos” Three mean words. My heart sank. I was actually embarrassed. That did explain the young babe who was given the feature instead of me, but why didn’t the great conversation I had with the interviewer matter? How did I fuck up? Funny thing was, the same publication featured a festival where I had a good slot as well as a film that featured one of my songs, BUT STILL I WASN’T QUALIFIED! Needless to say, I cared very much about my difficult record, which was just coming out at that time, so I felt especially vulnerable and shitty when I was silently given the axe. It seemed like sad-clown punctuation to a crappy couple of years. I felt like a dick.

I know, “boo hoo” and “who gives a fuck?” There are worse problems for sure. The point of this story is not to bitch about what I feel I deserve or didn’t get here in the “First world”, but instead to highlight that what I want as a feminist human being just bit me in the ass. And thank goodness! I had to accept it and realize that there are no guarantees anywhere. Turns out the person at the magazine who put the kibosh on my achievements as a musician and “as a woman” (and all the many women who worked on this) was another woman. The editor of one of the most famous magazines on earth is A WOMAN. It’s a very powerful thing, and not uncommon. Is that feminism? Yes! Does it suck? No, but also YES! Especially when the source is so exclusionary, and gives both sexes such a distorted view of the very essence of values, beauty, culture and intelligence. “Don’t be old.” “Don’t be fat.” “Wealthy people are mostly white and are much smarter than you.” “Get expensive, damaging surgery to be ‘good enough’ and in control”, etc., etc.. They push things that are TOTALLY INSANE AND IMPOSSIBLE.

These are not realities, they are very specific obsessions to which we subscribe if we don’t catch ourselves. We aren’t allowed into these glossy, “beautiful”, elite worlds (not that they actually exist as advertised), yet we help pay for them. Some of us even work for them despite not believing in the message, because we are talented writers, photographers and journalists and fashion designers, etc.— all kinds of creative minds who are SMART and open. But sometimes we subscribe to the idea that this is the only available platform from which to get the word out to a sizable audience about art, fashion, books, movies, politics and a trillion other interesting, important things. And then our efforts get little slices of real-estate tucked deep inside Botox, fad diets, drugs and plastic surgery.

Don’t get me wrong, working “inside the beast” is a very legit way to change it for the better, for sure; but it’s easy to simply say that and coast. Let’s not coast. Plus, if no fat people are allowed, I don’t really wanna hang out there, you know? That’s some bullshit we KNOW is really wrong by the time we start kindergarten.

The specific magazine in this story is by no means unique in sending this contradictory message. It is the media majority: print, TV, movies, music, internet and on and on... The web of pop culture is too large and omnipresent to confront with your chest puffed out and shout; “Stop trivializing us ladies and our accomplishments!” (not that we should stop trying). In place of ears, it has data collection systems that report numbers in dollar signs. Obvious? Yes, but I’m continually surprised by how often I forget this and let it slip into my subconscious.

The single most important thing I realized from all this is that 50% of my “problem” comprised what I brought to the table, for which I had to take responsibility. It didn’t take long to recognize

the childish nature of my desire to take part in something that is simultaneously both imaginary and so totally powerful. I shamed myself until the cows came home. Shame in every direction. I shamed myself until it was actually funny. But for a moment I bought into it, at which point I can only laugh at myself. I don't have those kind of bizarre values in the first place, so why did they suddenly look so shiny?

I think that when we try so hard and we work so diligently on things that matter to us, we expect some sort of benchmark or public reward. In my case, I'd hoped it would come in the form of a foxy magazine spread where I sound like a super-smart Mensa genius and also come off like a sage on whom a religion should be based, with an all-caps chapter heading and several bold pull-quotes to let me know I had ARRIVED. Turns out I WAS a dick.

Those benchmarks we covet or expect are like a diploma in a realm that has none, of which I am very conscious. In my life, there were no parents or diplomas, or parents to read the diplomas and say, "I'm so proud of you". This probably twisted me more than a bit, but the good part is, I could only blame the lack of those things on other people until I was about 26, and then I actually had to do something about it myself. I had to believe my life. That meant it could mean whatever I wanted, which is nicer than a magazine spread or a diploma. Right, Big Bird? Fuckin' A right! In real life, I have people I love and who love me back. For that reason, I am able to do what I believe in and THAT is my diploma. Cliché? Yes! Cliché for a reason and I love it! It's hard, and so worth it.

Why do we even have to talk about this in the year 2015? It's maddening beyond expression. I want to know at which point (or the many "points") in history men and women were truly made separate, and women became "less than?" It's the least simple, and most painful, question that has ever obsessed me. Maybe I will eventually find an answer in my research. My instinct cries; "fear, jealousy, power-mongering, and greed". There are many good sources out there, and the more I look, the more validated and inspired I feel. Honestly though, it's just taking too long for my post-arrival self. Maybe when a broader picture of what went so horribly wrong on such a massive scale begins to form in my mind, I can start to let go of some of my resentment at the injustice, which feels as filthy as the term "man's inhumanity to man".

Note: Checking in in 2015, I have done a LOT of research and I feel so much more solid about this. Knowledge is power, indeed.

For the reasons I've stated above, I'm constantly reading and searching for the multifarious women creators of our history because I know they are there; I *feel* them. Looking back in the history books, the ratio of "Huge deeds and statues and religions" tilts dramatically in favor of males. There is a lot of supposed evidence (being the lack of evidence) that says we didn't contribute much beyond breeding, whoring, wearing uncomfortable outfits and birthing Jesus (without a man, for which I have always been confused; if we are capable of THAT, why the fuck would we need a Pope? We are magic!). Did we really just fill the role of handier, fuckable children? My entire soul repudiates this idea.

I've seen the denial of great achievements by women in a historical context my whole life, in print, written by women and men alike, but the fact is, I DON'T BELIEVE IT. It's only a *fraction* of the story, the details of which we are *still* uncovering. We were here, or we wouldn't be here now. How do the believers of that theory manage to ignore that Queen Victoria, just one example, reigned, expanded and exploited what most sources call the largest empire THE

EARTH HAS EVER SEEN. For sixty-three and a half years! Was it because people liked her? Was it because she was pretty? Fuck no! She had fortunes upon fortunes, Prime Ministers, a balls navy and well-fed military tacticians. It was WORK. This also debunks the myth that women are the softer sex. We are just as capable of being wealthy, power-hungry, genocidal, racist assholes as the next guy. Ask Tzu-his, Victoria's contemporary and Manchu EMPRESS OF CHINA, as part of the MASSIVE (reportedly 6th largest) Qing Dynasty for almost 50 years!

Note: In 2015, after 6 months of intense research, it turns out I'm beyond correct; women DID INDEED contribute in EVERY way for 200,000 years. Hit those books with joy and expectation!

It may look like shit back there in history, but I want to have that too. I'm digging for Dahomey Amazons, Scythian warriors on horseback, Boudica, Viking shield maidens, Khutulun, Mulan, Polinitzi, Catherine the Great, and so on, ad infinitum. I want the writers, masons, physicists, philosophers, doctors, artists and on and on...

The Mona Lisa is important because we, the humans, *decided* it was; what's more, we keep telling people it *is* and we *give* it meaning. Leonardo would probably agree (as well as paint a psychedelic Masonic chart to illustrate why!). There were millions and millions of women who thought, made, wrote, painted, acted, sculpted, experimented and changed the world. There's plenty of room for all genders at the positive accolades and Nobel Prize galas, so let's change our brains and get the late-to-the-party women and LGBT pioneers into the history books where they belong; for good and for bad. Let's allow our young people to see more diverse representation so they can all get to see themselves. I *never* saw myself in a history book.

I think making us all "Man" in the past as well the present makes everybody responsible for all kinds of human practices, great AND shitty; art, genocide, medicine, slavery, literature, stirrup pants, everything. After all, women weren't invented in the 60s; we've always been here. And by "responsible for", I don't mean "to blame", but rather as "The heirs and future caretakers of..."

What do we bring to the table as boys and girls anyway? No one thing, but most women and a good number of men I have come to know in my life feel less than worthy when it comes to adjectives like "smart", "beautiful" or "unique". That hurts the fuck out of me and I take it very personally, especially when I can see the magnificence of these individuals. It hurts that I'm just like them and I can't see it in myself always either; however, I've gotten better at it, and the fact is, we, as humans, have only "better" to which to aspire, because we are lagging behind in this respect. We have GALAXIES of room to love ourselves, and no one is displaced by our expansion! On the contrary, the warmth and well-being spreads, affects and inspires each other. So let's not allow each other to forget, because the effort of loving yourself isn't easy for most people. We have to relearn really obvious things we take for granted a lot, so sincere help, humor and forgiveness help those things to really stick. In my life, I have found that people who balance honor and irreverence have made the most potent, positive impressions on me. They have helped me form a strong, flexible will (I keep thinking about Richard Pryor as I write this part...)

Well, there you go. Thank you for reading this (if you made it to the end, haha!). I'm not taking questions or comments, I'm just hoping you'll write (or play or live or whatever...) your own version for YOU. I'm so glad you are all here in this world with me, and what I really want is to make us all feel GOOD. Thanks for listening while I take out my clumsy heart and get it all over

you and me and your good shirt. We are responsible for it together. We are equal. I really love us.

All my love and respect, Neko Case, 2015

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In case you are interested, below is a list of some of the books I've read during this quest that have helped me get a grip on some of our shared human history. Read on!

"The Chalice and the Blade" by Riane Eisler

"The Swerve: How the World Became Modern" by Stephen Greenblatt

"The Amazons: Lives and Legends of Warrior Women Across the Ancient World" by Adrienne Mayor

"The Strange Career of Jim Crow" by C. Vann Woodward

"Empress Dowager Cixi" by Jung Chang

"The Woman who Would be King: Hatshepsut's Rise to Power in Ancient Egypt" by Kara Cooney

"The Rise and Fall of Alexandria: The Birthplace of the Modern Mind" by Justin Pollard and Howard Reid

"Pearl Buck in China" by Hilary Spurling

Also, a REALLY great documentary about the women's rights movements of the 60s and 70s.

"She's Beautiful When She's Angry", directed by Mary Dore

AND, my two personal favorites.

“International Sweethearts of Rhythm” and “Tiny and Ruby: Hell Divin’ Women” by Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss

OH! And don’t forget the “Before Stonewall” doc, also by Greta Schiller.

***Everything I’ve ever studied regarding the fight for Civil Rights in this country is crucial for every aspect of human rights in my experience. The cross-sections of all movements all tie together and illuminate.

***These are just a drop in the bucket. I’ll add more as it strikes. xo N