LTPF Season 3, Episode 3 – Music

Guest: Norma Coates - an Associate Professor, Don Wright Faculty of Music and the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at Western University. Her research focuses on two area areas: popular music and identity, particular gender, age, and the intersection of both; and popular music on US network television before MTV. Her scholarship and writing about gender and rock music is cited and read internationally. She is the current Past President of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, US Branch.

Full Transcript:

Kadie Philp

I'm Kadie Philp. Each of us has one. A favourite song that no matter what your mood, can transform, motivate and move you. But can a song or an artist or, music more broadly, move something bigger than us alone in our living rooms dancing? Can that same music move the dial on social, political and economic issues? Can music change how society works? This episode I speak with Dr. Norma Coates, Associate Professor with the Don Wright Faculty of Music and the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at Western University about how female artists have used music to call out injustices and advocate for change. We'll take you on a journey through many genres and voices singing about poverty, racism, domestic violence and economic inequality, and explore the pivotal role of women in the music industry, their contributions, and the ongoing struggle for pay equity and representation.

Kadie Philp (00:00.331)

Dr. Coates, you have done extensive work on the intersection of gender, music and media. And I know this because I did my masters at the Faculty of Information and Media Studies and I'm quite familiar with your work. I'm excited to survey how women in music and non-binary artists have actually challenged conventional. We've got a lot to talk about and in fact you created a really fantastic timeline highlighting key moments for women in music and I really, I'm going to share that with our listeners in the show notes because they're going to think that's just so cool. But where should we start this discussion? Like when did women start using music as a form of social resistance or change? Maybe that's not the right word but you know who were some of these early artists? or what were some of the early songs that really gave voice to women's issues, for lack of a better term?

Norma Coates (01:01.197)

Well, I was thinking about this. It's actually a hard question to answer to some degree, partly because female artists have not been as talked about and written about as male artists. But I decided to place it in the 20s and 30s, at least in the modern music industry, with the female blues singers that were recorded on so-called race records back in the days when the industry was segregated purposely by the major labels into Tin Pan Alley Pop, that is know, all pop, race, African American music, and hillbilly, that is white country music. And some of the people recorded, like

people like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, Mamie Smith, Sidney Thomas, Victoria Spivey, Ida Cox, Memphis Minnie, who you can still find on recordings or on Spotify anywhere, just the things they were singing about. They were singing about black women's lives. They were singing about sexuality quite bodily. They were singing about things that, know, I like to think that what they were doing was a form of protest of like, you know, in a way that maybe not purposely, but in a way for black women to speak their truth at that point in time was kind of, you know, not something that really happened. And it's interesting because these blues singers were, they were kind of the foundation of rock and roll. mean, Led Zeppelin stole Memphis Minie's song, When the Levee Breaks, and you know, it's known for them. But no, she originally did that. She was a guitar player. She's singing about her environment. So I would really have to say that we might want to start there and just really give a good listen to what they're singing about. And we will learn a lot about black women's lives in the Europe, for better or worse.

Kadie Philp (02:36.173)

Wow. So it is so fascinating that it starts not just gendered, but also racialized. That it's black women coming to the music space and telling their story and using songs as a form of empowerment. That is, I think, so incredibly powerful and probably something, as you said, people don't know enough about this because there's not as much written, but that is incredible. Let's jump. You start in the 20s and 30s.

Norma Coates (02:58.222)

Yes. Well, I actually was going to take a pause in the 1940s and just talk about not so much protesting, but there was Sister Rosetta Tharp, who was a Church of Gospel in Christ preacher. She was also an incredible guitarist and she is arguably the first big deal electric guitarist in one of her songs in the 40s. Some have said that, like the popular music historian and brilliant Gail Wald has said that it's probably the first rock guitar solo. And yet she, until Dr. Wald published Shout Sisters Shout about 10 to 15 years ago, she was unheard of. And now she has been elevated up where she belongs. So just the idea of a black woman playing a Gibson SG, which is the ultimate heavy metal guitar, it's one that looks like devil horns, it's quite a thing. And yet she was, no one really knew who she was. She was disappeared for years. In fact, Wald actually put a headstone on her grave from what I understand so..

Kadie Philp (04:29.215)

It's incredible that you've made the point that we don't know because there's just not as much written about these women musicians. Like there's just, there's so much more discourse and dialogue and pop culture around men, but women were always present in the space laying foundations for other women and for it to grow. Thanks for that stop in the forties. That's really fascinating. Now I know you go ahead.

Norma Coates (04:45.137)

Absolutely. Okay. And now I'll, and I was going to say the next stop is, and I didn't, I need to put this on your list by the way, you can take that out, was the folk, second folk revival of the late 50s. I mean, one of the first big stars of it, female stars, was Joan Baez. She was bigger than Dylan at that time. And of course she is not a songwriter per se, but you know, she sang these songs. She was also very outspoken politically. And that's probably what she's often remembered for. She's still outspoken politically. She is, she's out there. She has a new film biography of her out there. And she got kind of subsumed, I think, when rock takes over, unfortunately, partly through her ex-partner, Bob Dylan, who she's still tied with, even though they haven't been a couple for 60 years. So you had, you had Joan Baez, you had others in the second folk revival who either singer-songwriters or people who facilitated a lot of the things like the editors of Broadside magazine. And then though, when I say, you know, I'm not sure that this particular singer started out to in order to protest how things were, and I'm sure I'm missing things too, by the way. I mean, there are lot of African American women singers in the 50s and 60s too that we really need to listen to what they were saying. And just that they were doing was kind of remarkable. But then I think about Joni Mitchell, who comes out here from Canada, of course, and she started singing about her life, her emotions, the real feeling of what it was like to feel like a woman in some ways and a young woman to go through things and she continues to have in, in, you know, now it's seen, you know, now that she almost died and has come back and I saw her at the Hollywood bowl. That was amazing with my 18 with my daughter who discovered her as 18 is not 18 anymore, but discovered her at the same age. You know, it was Mitchell who really, in my opinion, brought out, so I have some notes I'm looking at, she really started to sing about what it was like to be a woman and the female experience and really differentiating it from the male experience in a big way. It was given the name confessional singer-songwriter which she later kind of disdained. And then when she, after the 70s, her music became more political and observational. And lot of people didn't like that, but listening to it again is, you know, that's a voice we really need to hear in a perspective that we don't often have. I mean, she sang a song about a friend who was called Cherokee Louise is the name of the song, who was suffering sexual abuse from her stepfather, you know, and she actually played that at the Hollywood Bowl concert. So very obviously, it's something that she wanted to get out there. You know, for her to be singing about those sort of things in the 80s, that was not happening. So, you know, I think she's not the only one. know, Carole King is known for her songwriting, known for tapestry. But, you know, songs like she didn't write the lyrics out to We Used to Love Me Tomorrow about, you know, this typical teenage sex song. know, her husband at the time, Jerry Goffin, actually wrote those lyrics. you know, but, you know, you start to think, you know, she's also singing about female experience, especially her later albums. So I think if we dig in to a lot of the singer-songwriters of that era who often were not treated well by the industry, by rock criticism, things like that, we'll see that they're really making statements. I Joni Mitchell, her record company, record label, Warners, would put one of their ads said, Joni Mitchell is 90 % virgin. And they were always playing off that sort of thing. you're really swimming against the tide at that point. Yep.

Kadie Philp (08:59.554)

my God. Yeah. the gender stereotype that they think is going to sell - this wholesome Puritan woman, whereas on the other hand she was singing completely different narratives and bringing attention to much broader issues in women's lives. Now I know around that time also, a 70s, 80s, is sort of the emergence of punk music. And I know you've done some really great work in that space. This is sort of your space. What was happening in that time and genre that really challenged gender norms and women coming into that space in a new way?

Norma Coates (09:40.217)

Well, yes, I was a punk back then, and frankly, it's still kind of the inspirational thing of my life, the motivating thing in my life. And I mean, a lot of punks were the kids who are, I like to call us edge boomers, you know, born between about 57 and 64, who really missed the 60s. Yeah, we might have known someone's older brother, you know, gone off the war, and older brothers and sisters protesting, but we missed it. So we're kind of stuck in the suburbs and the cities. Not much interesting is going on. Rock and roll music is just getting very, well, it was very, it's split into a lot of things by then. mean, glam rock was, I liked what I knew of that at the time. But for when I first heard punk, it just kind of blew my head wide open. Someone locked me into my dorm room with the first two Sex Pistols singles and wouldn't let me come out until I had listened to them. And Patti Smith, of course, was one of the first I got into. And to hear a woman, amazing. And I would still recommend anyone, if she's in your town, go see her. She's 78 or 77 and still putting on tremendous shows, politically charged, just very, very inspiring.

Kadie Philp (10:42.881)

Yeah, she's incredible. Yeah.

Norma Coates (11:00.11)

But at that point, she was, I remember guarding her, doing security backstage at her show at UMass Amherst where I went to university. And at that point, she still does a bit, stomps around the stage, spits. I remember this campus police officer going, that girl's spitting, my god. Women don't behave that way. So that was very powerful. And to kind of hear the power of her voice in an electric background was very powerful as well. And she looked very androgynous, her first album Horses with the picture by Robert Mapplethorpe. She's looking more like Frank Sinatra with his jacket slung over her shoulder. That was great. And then of course, out of England, we had some amazing bands. The Slits, who used a lot of reggae and dub, and they're singing about what it's like to be a girl and a woman in that society and not very charitable about it. The raincoats, again, they didn't really care about how well they played their instruments. It was more a bunch of artists getting the word out. it seemed at the time, and also you had Blondie, even though Debbie Harry, you might think, well, she, know, pretty poppy. But at the same time that was a persona that she was using on purpose, kind of to shove these ideas of this pop chick back in people's faces. mean, one of their first hits was called Ex-Offender, and that was for Sex Offender. was about this hooker or something who

gets picked up by a cop and falls in love with him. They're singing these songs that are somewhat transgressive, but again, putting them in this pop package.

Kadie Philp (12:46.306)

Right.

Norma Coates (12:50.108)

I remember Tina Weymouth as a Talking Heads playing bass. This little woman with a huge bass just was transfixing to watch her. So you just got the idea that women belonged, at least in that little piece of music, women belonged. And again, it was very inspiring. I didn't feel the usual kind of barriers to talking about music, although they were still there. But it was very inspirational. It just made me just think that women belong here. We belong in these spaces. We belong in these clubs. Now was that, yeah, unfortunately it was kind of short lived originally, but very influential later. I mean, people like Yoko Ono, you know, are inspirational, the punk groups, just the idea of, you know, women scream and we scream for reasons. The scream was kind of mobilized as a tool at that point.

Kadie Philp (13:43.715)

Yeah. Well, it's interesting you're making the point of how representation matters, like saying it felt like women belonged because they were playing bass, they were playing electric guitar, they were screaming, they were spitting, they were singing about women's experiences in a quote unquote man's more aggressive, like the punk scene was more aggressive and you have women acting out aggression on stage, which is categorically not feminine. it, but that for women of your generation and even my generation and the generations below me that discover it again and again, Sonic Youth was a huge one for me where you discover that music with a female front, a woman, person, like just bringing it and you see yourself reflected. And I think that's part of the story where it does take an interesting turn though, because, know, that's, we're talking 70s, 80s into the 90s we also see the kind of grunge movement but I'll jump us to the 2000s because it like totally changes because women then become like okay Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, Avril Lavigne, Queen Latifah, Missy Elliott, super like pop but they're still talking about things like financial independence, empowerment but even maybe troubling because sometimes the empowerment is maybe through vehicles that aren't necessarily empowering and then Queen Latifah and Missy Elliott really taking on narratives about gender roles in male dominated spaces. So what a juxtaposition of those two moments of women in music, right? And where do you see or how do you, and I know that's not your expertise, but what do you think about the power dynamic happening there in women's representation on stage?

Norma Coates (15:28.814)

Well, if I can just back up just a little bit because we, well, first of all, we didn't talk about, well, Riot Girl, which is like young teenage girls in the 90s, around the same time as Grunge, trying to take back their power, trying to organize just amongst themselves. They went on a media blackout couldn't sustain because media got interested in all this with all these 14 year old girls, 15, 16 year old girls screaming about sexism. Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Hill would clear the, I would say, women to the front. And that meant guys get to the back. You don't own this space. And a lot of men did not like that when she did that. It would cause trouble. And she's coming from a point of view of a someone who had been sexually abused, had a crazy background, organized a lot of women that did that. I think Riot Girl has had an effect on some of the infrastructure and things like Rock Camp for Girls comes a bit out of that or comes out of people who were involved in Riot Girl early on. And the second moment I just want to talk about is the MTV. That makes a big change in the industry back to kind of the repressive, back to the battle days. So after punk, just as punk is kind of dying out, post-punk's happening, New Wave music is kind of the approved radio-friendly version, and Blondie might have been one of the only groups, that and the B-52s with women in them. And the B-52s, of course, is pretty queer, which was unusual at the time, and those in the know knew, but I don't think mainstream radio did. You especially have someone like Madonna who came and really started to use her sexuality and to really try to, you know, and really she would keep changing her persona. She was always making these, you know, say quasi-feminist kind of things, but of course dressed in women's lingerie and doing whatever and kind of using her sexuality to do that, which is okay, absolutely, but unfortunately kind of MTV moved the industry to be much more focused on image and looks and how sexy you look on stage, male and female, because you think about Prince at the time, or Michael Jackson. And so all of sudden image becomes important, video becomes important. So that's like in my mind, that's a bit of a step backward for women, despite how empowering Madonna could be. Because we also at the same time, and I think we also have this in the 2000s, we can come back to your question, that women still have the infrastructure around popular music. So you have the industry full of men. Women might be in PR or you know, you have AR basically, men, artists and repertoire finding bands. have critics, critics are either men or forced to kind of write like men. At that time, rock criticism had a lot more force than it has now. I mean, everyone read it, whereas now just we old people do. And so there's this kind of a, it's always hard to get through that system and to make any change. They'll say, okay, you know, we need these sexy videos. But is that going to translate to anything else? I don't know.

Kadie Philp (19:00.127)

Exactly. Yeah, the sort of really highly sexualized gendered representation of women back. It's almost like a step back because you had like Patti Smith on stage with like a baggy t-shirt and ripped jeans and like not sexualized at all. As you said, very androgynous and other women in punk very masculine or androgynous to now. They're maybe singing about empowerment, but highly sexualized representations of women. it's an interesting, sexually provocative, right, to say that argument that sexual provocativity is power for women, which there's a lot of discourse on. We won't get into that on this show, but there's a lot of discourse. There's a lot on like, ha ha, we tricked you into being sexually provocative and thinking that's powerful. So it's a really interesting moment in music, think, and for women. grew up in that era, well, I was going through this university in the 2000s and that was part of it. Thankfully, I was FIMS, so I was introduced to Sonic Youth and other

groups. Yeah, well, okay, so in high school, I lived through the folk movement and maybe this is one we chatted a bit about this and you know Lilith Fair, obviously Sarah McLachlan, really huge project to highlight gender disparities in music, which you just started to talk about in terms of like male representation and how women are or all artists are selected, managed, invested in. And she created that protest that that festival is a protest to say like women can be double billed and women can show tickets, sell tickets. Now that festival played a huge role in shaping conversation about pay equity, representation, all these things from music, but there was also a little bit problematic. Can you share both pieces, like what you see, how it shaped the conversation, but also what was sort of some of the problems with that movement?

Norma Coates (20:50.152)

Yeah, you know, my take on the problems might be a little eclectic, because I, you know, that's right when I was in graduate school writing about gender and music. I had been really, I mean, the 90s was actually an interesting time for women in music too. Sure, you had grunge, but you had groups out of that movement like Hole with Courtney Love, who were really singing about women's positions in society and abuse and this sort of thing, although Courtney Love was such a fractious personality that, yes, very did have a character. You had The Breeders. In fact, Kim Deal, just of The Breeders, just came out with a solo album. had time to listen to it yet, but I'm looking forward to it. So you had PJ Harvey. You had folks like that. Tori Amos. You had a lot of interesting women singers and performers. L7 is very loud, thrashy, kind of hardcore group. But then by the end of the decade, you have the, you're still having this resistance to booking more than one woman on a bill, which was Sarah McLaughlin's brilliant idea. It got a lot of conversation. It certainly appealed to a lot of people. I never went, even though I was living about 70 miles away from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where I could have gone. I also had the baby.

Kadie Philp (22:17.941)

I went every year in Toronto. I was there in Toronto. Yeah, it's hard.

Norma Coates (22:19.902)

What's that? You went? I also had a newborn infant at the time. But I had issues with it because the music on especially the first tour was pretty acoustic. So this is a time when there's a lot of women plugging in guitars, being loud, really saying we're influenced by Yoko Ono, we're going to scream, going to, you know, a lot of good indie bands of the time, bands and groups like that. But yet, know, Lilla Fair got a lot of flack for being, you know, all kind of soft rock women. She added to that later on, and she would bring women performers in local cities where they were. She'd bring local women in. One of my friends sang for them, said she was given a terrible slot and that sort of thing. But they still tried. I never went, partly because of the baby and partly because I just wasn't attracted to the music. think being older and wiser now, I would probably go. But unfortunately that also then set up critics and others to kind of sexually male critics. There's, it's all Lilith music. All of

a sudden Lilith music becomes a, yeah, it became a sub brand of like, it's just women's music. It's not that good if it's all women performing, right? That kind of like, we see that in the gender labor market, like, well, it can't be that hard if women do it, like, you know, accounting or clerical work, whatever. It's not that hard. It's like you're saying the Lilith Fair created that like, well, it's like Lilith music. So it's obviously not that good or appealing. Yeah. Right. Not that good. For women. it's that it's, know, and where did that come from? That's what starts circulating about it. Now, it's not to say it wasn't a great thing. And you know, I remembered something that should have come earlier when I was talking about women in music. The women's music movement of the 1970s, pretty much lesbian feminist result. That was a moment, it went on for a while, it Olivia records. So these are basically lesbians singing for other lesbians. the movement had all sorts of things associated with it, particularly the Michigan Women's Festival that went on every year. I'm not sure it still does. Again, as a straight woman, I was never quite someone who likes a strong back beat, was never my sort of music.

Kadie Philp (24:36.459)

Yeah, but I think it's good that you raised it at the right point because that's also a branding with Lilith Fair. Lilith Fair became like a lesbian, like, you're going to go a bunch of lesbians in Birkenstocks, right? Like that was part of the people would talk about that. So I think it's really interesting, a bit of a revival of the 70s lesbian music movement, which is interesting and how it became another way of kind of like diminishing the contribution or devaluing what was going on because it's like just lesbian folk singers, right? So I think that's part of the narrative is how it's talked about greatly shaped while they're raising issues and problems of gender representation and disparities and pay and all of it, how the media responds by saying, well, we can just dismiss this because it's a bunch of folky lesbians and Birkenstocks, which is damaging.

Norma Coates (25:26.412)

Right. Folkie lesbians. Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. It's so that that didn't help. Yeah.

Kadie Philp (25:36.875)

Was it, it was, no, it definitely, it definitely did not help. And I know a part of the criticism of Lilith Fair was it was also mostly white women.

Norma Coates (25:46.891)

Mostly white, absolutely, yep.

Kadie Philp (25:48.263)

And I know that later there was efforts to cast a net wider and artists like Tracy Chapman and Sheryl Crowe tried to use their music, you from my understanding, you may have a different perspective as a form of activism during the folk music and especially Tracy Chapman bringing advocacy beyond gender and also to bring in intersectional issues like race and class. Did you see that emerging at that time?

Norma Coates (26:15.631)

I wasn't paying as much attention as I should have, but for a time, problem is these issues would come up, but then they would go under the water again. There wasn't anything kind of sustaining them. And also at the same time, we had groups like the Spice Girls coming out, and some of the groups you mentioned earlier, and the Spice Girls come out as this prefab and they're made by this production company and they're put together and they're yelling, girl power, girl power. they kind of... You know, it's hard, I think, sometimes for the industry and journalists and all to keep more than one idea in their head so that you could have both the Spice Girls and the groups, you know, women like PJ Harvey and Tracy Chabot, stuff like that in the 90s, you know, doing their thing. you know, it's hard to keep one in the head. So all of a sudden, you know, the Spice Girls attract a lot of young girls, partly with that message in kind of a way, I think we older people, and I was older at the time and I'm studying music, I wasn't sure what to think of it. On one hand, anything that got little girls screaming girl power is a good thing, you know. But they were, of course, made fun of constantly, you know. No one took them seriously at all. And unfortunately, I think even Britney Spears was at that time also, you know, huge, huge, huge.

Kadie Philp (27:43.411)

yeah, not taken seriously. Yeah.

Norma Coates (27:54.991)

I don't know how empowering she was allowed to be. On one hand, you could look at her. You could look at her videos and songs and think, yeah, you know, there's some good messages in there. But at the same time, she's, you know, needing to, know, highly sexualized image. And of course, we've now heard a lot about poor Brittney and what happened with her. And, you know, pretty much driven crazy, I think, by highly constructed and controlled. Yes, by lot of the negativity, at least for a while, know, young girls subject her to that sort of torture, which it really was, was problematic.

Kadie Philp (28:25.024)

Yeah. I think that's, that's part of Brittney's story and a lot of female artist stories is like, damned if you do, damned if you don't. The gender expectations for women is much different. Like men can get away with a lot more on stage or in their personal lives. And for women, know, it's like, we just love to exalt them or demonize them depending on the day. And that's where maybe this is a good

time to talk about another artist who young girls just love, Taylor Swift. Right, she's the new wave of female empowerment in music, and I know her song, The Man, really directly critiqued gender-based double standards, sort of what we're talking about right now. What do you think about that song in particular, or what you see happening around the Swift mania in terms of advancing public discourse on gender inequality?

Norma Coates (29:24.755)

Well, you know, that's a really good question. I had not heard the man until yesterday. I know Taylor's bigger songs and I heard it. I was kind of blown away and watched the video too. I had no idea that she'd done that. And then looking into it a bit, it was on Lover, which comes out right as she has given Scooter Braun, know, Scooter Braun has just bought up her back catalog and even the video for it has a No Scooters little sign on it.

Kadie Philp (29:50.081)

Yes. Yeah. Pretty bold.

Norma Coates (29:55.076)

She was very, very bold you know, basically I think is an important moment. Not just that the song is really showing us what we all, anyone who's born a woman, even if you're younger, knows already how we are treated. It happens in every, anything happens here at university. I won't say anything else. But to hear that song and then to see the video where she's playing the man, which I thought was great, I think that moment is what pushed her to start doing those Taylor versions. And it's those Taylor versions that are an incredible statement that, you know, I'm not going to let this man make a small fortune off my music. I'm going to re-record them so they're mine and he can't mess with it.

Kadie Philp (30:44.363)

Yeah, reclaim it.

Norma Coates (30:50.983)

do whatever he wants with my music. And for someone to come out and be so, you know, and to do that, I'm trying to think of the right way to say it, to do that is really something. And I think it's one of the things that might have, I think the Taylor version's really, again, I'm not a, there are people who are real Taylor experts and I know several could hook you up with them. But, you know, I think that she, I think that really energized the Swifties and they're an incredible community. They're probably the first community of female fans in decades who have not been made fun of. They were at first

and yeah, I you could still go on social media and people are going, I don't know why people like her, Swifties are dumb, they're a force and they are a political force. They are an economic force. I mean, it's going to be interesting when they tally up how much money Toronto made after the last two weekends, over the last two weekends. hundreds of millions is what I'm hearing so far. I'm not sure any artist has ever done that. mean, you we can look back 60 years to Beatlemania, but the world was very different then. And for her to, yeah.

Kadie Philp (32:02.677)

Yeah, and I think her, the, you the piece about the money is so important, right? Because we know the pay inequities in general are there. And we know in music industry, it's insidious as well. We also have some stats I'll share later as we wrap up. But just the fact that she was able to under like that, she had the audacity to say, that's my content and I'm worthy of it, and I'm going to recreate it and reap the reward. And it's such a powerful women message, I think, all women, especially younger women, to say, like, claim what you're worth and own it. Now, the only other artists I think recently that has done that is you know Beyonce with her Renaissance tour that was huge and her song Brown Skin Girl you know also it's tackle gender equality but more poignantly representations of inequality with race and how do you see you know that conversation shaping out in terms of in the music industry about you know artists of color and racialized and engendered spaces. It's interesting because sometimes I don't know how to connect an artist like Beyonce, who is one of the top in the world, married to one of the top in the world, incredible amount of cultural and financial power, to the rest of the industry. Because the rest of the industry, I think Beyonce has a lot more control over what she does and doesn't do. I that was one of the things briefly going back to Taylor, is she made people realize that record contracts try to take your masters, they try to take everything that belongs to you, and they are the ones who run a profit off it. And, you know, to say watch out for that in contracts. And now, of course, the industry is realizing that a lot of people are saying, I want my masters and they don't want that. But people like Olivia Rodrigo kept their masters. know, Billie Eilish, believe, younger artists have taken that example. But to go back to where were we? What did you? Yeah. Talking about the racialized connections because her song black skin girl.

Norma Coates (34:02.413)

Well, so Beyonce. Yeah. And that's a great song because there's so much colorism. If you look at a lot of actors, a lot of singers, they're, they're black, but they're not black, black, you know, it's always been color discrimination against black or women with even within African American and, you know, African culture, African based cultures or descended cultures. And that's really important. All black women are beautiful. That's a message to hear. She had people like Lupita Nyong'o in the video, which a very dark woman who had just won an Oscar, I believe, at that point. But how does it carry over to the industry? That I don't know for sure, because I'm still looking at... If you look at some of the more popular artists now, and I don't always keep up as much as I can. I have a hard time listening to music while I work, so that's part of the issue.

Kadie Philp (34:59.893)

Yeah, and I think sometimes you need time to see the impact, right? Like if these are still relatively new, like Taylor Swift's The Man and Beyonce's Brown Skin Girl, they're relatively new. So we'll probably in five, 10 years look back and go, wow, it created this shift. We're kind of seeing it real time. Yeah.

Norma Coates (35:00.872)

Yeah, right. Although Beyonce's doing, I'm sorry, yeah it did. I think you start to introduce something to people and then you start to think. And you being a consumer or something or a fan starts to think, okay, what else am I seeing? Beyonce has been, mean Brown Skin Girl's a great song, but her work in the last few albums, Cowboy Carter, that has really opened a conversation that no one's wanted to have, which is the presence of black people in country music. Way back in the 20s and when they separated race and country, it seemed weird because there was a lot of back and forth. Even in the Jim Crow South, there's always been a lot of back and forth between the races. And a lot of white performers learned their licks and things from black people that they met, black musicians.

Kadie Philp (36:12.426)

Absolutely, yeah.

Norma Coates (36:14.651)

For Beyonce to be tackling, that's what, dance music, know, claiming them for black people is kind of wonderful. Before that, you know, Lemonade and the Beyonce visual album, she was bringing up issues of really putting Americans' racial history right in our faces and how it felt from a black, you know, from the black perspective, because it's always been the white perspective that's more important. So I think she's having an extraordinary impact. where's it, where's it, it's just having an impact on her, people that listen to her and people who write about her and all. But, you know, what is the impact within the industry, especially given that Beyonce is in such a rarefied position. I'm sure it's there. I'm sure it's there.

Kadie Philp (36:58.871)

Right. I think it is. I think as you made the point, it's opened up the conversation. It's put the racialized history in front of everyone. And it makes it like you cannot not see it. And she's making it very, very obvious. For those who are willing to look at it and see it, I remember watching the Lemonade album. and just being blown away by the power of the way she told the story and being able to understand the history through these narratives and through the song. And I think that that's

just part of education for other women and men, all people really, to understand the broader perspective. Now, as we get ready to close up, I could talk to you all day, I want to bring it to, I'll share a little bit of stats on gender inequalities and especially pay equities because that's what we do at the pay equity offices look specifically and we've touched a little bit on that. And you shared with me some fantastic reports. I think one of them was the Universal Music UK report which showed that there is significant gender disparities. I think according to the latest snapshot, gender pay gap for UK, the stat is 24.4%, which is quite high. That's women earning a quarter less than men, or 75 % of what men make. And we know that similarities, similar disparities exist in North America, globally. And we know, you shared another great report, be the change gender equality music study where women are twice as likely as men to discover that they've been paid less and of gender expansive individuals, 28%. So the problem is persisting. And so I'd love to hear kind of forward looking, we've done such an amazing survey, but as we continue to see shifts and women using activism, like music as activism in their voice and bringing the issues into the song. and we continue to see conversations about even the business side of music, like more representation of women in management and leadership roles, right? That's also part of what Taylor Swift was talking about. What do you think the next decade is going to look like, you know, in terms of all of these things, pay equity, representation of women, and what can we do to continue the sort of like trajectory of more inclusion?

Norma Coates (39:18.759)

I think it's going to be a tricky decade. The things I shared with you were the USC Annenberg reports. They do those every year on gender equity and racial equity in the music industry. And the numbers still aren't good. There's no female executive of a large music consortium these days.

Kadie Philp (39:45.409)

Yeah, it's wild.

Norma Coates (39:48.882)

You get a few at like the VP or director level, but then there's not much and there never has been. But I'm a little worried about the impact of the coming regime in the US on the music industry, you know, on entertainment industries in general. And of course, one of the coming regime, I hate to say the guy's name actually, is very anti-DEI, very anti-EDID movement, basically trying to ban them, stop them. A lot of universities are succumbing to that. And what's going to be the influence on the entertainment industry? Are they going to fight or are they going to concede? Now, entertainment industry is a fairly liberal place in the US and as is, I think, most popular music. But what impact? Will they be punished for continuing with DEI or that sort of thing? Will it not seem as important? I mean, right now, the big thing seems to be toxic masculinity. how do you work women, how do we're toxic? And I think that's usually applied to straight white guys. So how does that going to affect? But on the other hand, with the power of people like Beyonce and Taylor Swift, and even

someone like Chappell Roan who came out of nowhere after kind of, her first go-around with the music industry tried to turn her into just a kind of boring pop singer. Yeah, cutesy pop, and she rejected that and came up with her, you know, Chappell Roan name and persona, and she has really got people going. Yeah, I mean, she's incredible too. And so maybe, and of course, the industry does look for trends. So, yeah, they do try to jump on them and make as much money as possible out of them. we might see, you know, the year of sapphic pop might go on for a while, which would be wonderful. You know, there's this wonderful genre called hyperpop, which kind of takes pop and meshes and mixes it up and cuts it up. And very known, some of its major practitioners are trans people. So, there's there are spaces out there and you know if something becomes popular in some ways then that's you might see a carry-on effect or rather a pile on effect. and so and I think that and I think it's wonderful that people like Taylor Swift and Beyonce and Chablron you know use their power to point out some of the issues. So I think that that itself is going to tell the emergence of the trends. Yeah, exactly, women who do not fit into this kind of model of the music industry that, okay, you know, there are possibilities for you here and there's support for you. And there are more groups about women in music, more people trying to get together and fight these problems, but still very, very hard. was, I just found this report yesterday, but there's a report about Canadian radio done by Dr. Jada Watson, who's at Ottawa, who has studied that for a while. And Canadian radio is so white so male so I had a few notes on it here.

Kadie Philp (43:22.051)

But you know, it's really, while you're looking for that, I'll just share a quick story on, I remember reading Jan Arden talking about her big break and how she had, you know, I was a huge Jan Arden fan in the 90s and she's great. And so she gave this guy her album, you to listen to her demo tape and he put it his car, he listened and he was kind of like, yeah, no, like it's really not a great album, whatever, I'm not into it. And so we told her like, no, not going to happen. And then a couple of months later, his fiancée broke up with him and he was driving in his car and her tape was still in the little tape deck and he listened to it and he said he just bawled and he called her and he said I get it I get your music and he had to and because her narratives are very personal it's a female perspective and he gave her a record deal because finally you know he was a man that just had a very deeply emotional experience and had a had an artist that allowed him to emote and feel and it changed her career and I thought it's just so interesting that initially he listened to it and said no this is like no one's going to relate to this and it wasn't until he had that personal experience and this is why representation matters in the leadership right of having of having women and people with different experiences and different ethnic identities because they come to the music very differently and that's obviously a problem even you know in our radio system if we don't have that.

Norma Coates (44:30.38)

Yep. it's in our radio station system according to Jada Watson, it's not great. studies and articles have emerged as the absence of women across festivals and award nominations in the Canadian music industry. But radio, one of the oldest and most established pathways of distribution is

exposure has received limited attention. So she gave it some attention. She looked at six genres, including country. Yeah, I should send that to you. BIPOC women.

Kadie Philp (45:09.099)

Yeah. Yeah. We've got to look at it. Send us the report, we'll link it.

Norma Coates (45:17.319)

BIPOC women and trans artists are invisible in country music. Women are significantly underrepresented in an alternative rock format radio. Top 40 has a greater level of ethnic and racial diversity.

Kadie Philp (45:36.707)

Interesting to see how it changes by genre.

Norma Coates (45:37.7)

But women are underplayed by Canadian record, Trinity Radio, in all six formats for the last decade. Trans artists are, she said, invisibilized. Significant racial inequality and songs by white men receive the most airplay by those artists. Yep.

Kadie Philp (45:49.635)

So it sounds like we need some work. There's some work to do in Canadian radio on gendered representations and racialized. Yeah.

Norma Coates (46:05.102)

And a near absence, right, near absence in Canadian radio of indigenous artists. yeah, and radio, you know, it's funny, it's never been my go-to, not for a long time. And you think, well, someone should do a similar thing on streaming, know, what are we hearing, who are we hearing on playlist. So, you know, there's places to really focus, because radio's kind of a gateway into everything else.

Kadie Philp (46:28.151)

Yeah, And I think that's a nice place to wrap it, to say like, you know, there's places where we see progress still stalled, still challenges, but then there's places where a lot more work is needed. And it's the point you made at beginning of the podcast that if we're not writing about it, if we're not

researching it, if we're not looking at it, then we don't discover the problem and we don't discover the work that needs to be on our solution. thank you so, this was so fascinating for the survey and the key moments. I'm going to go make a playlist of like all the artists in order and I'll share that with all my friends, male and female, everybody to say listen to this has changed the face of music. So thank you. Thank you so much for your insight.

Kadie Philp

Here are the top three things I got from Norma Coates in this episode:

1. Protest found its roots in the rhythm and Blues in the 1920s and 30s): Early blues artists like Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey used their music to share black women's lived experiences, paving the way for music as a tool for resistance and empowerment.
2. Women were the Trailblazing Guitarists who brough the Folk Revival in the 40's through the 60s): Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Joan Baez redefined women's roles in music with electric guitar solos and outspoken political activism, influencing the trajectory of modern music.
3. Modern Empowerment and Ownership continues to move the dial: From Taylor Swift reclaiming her masters to Beyoncé spotlighting racial and gender inequalities, today's artists are leading powerful conversations about equity and representation.

Thank you for listening. Don't forget to follow or subscribe and share this podcast. Until next time, let's keep asking questions, challenging norms, and working toward a more equitable world for women to work, live and thrive.