A GOSPEL FOR THE GODLESS:
THE ARTICULATION OF TRANSGENDER MUSICAL IDENTITIES
THROUGH VOICE, PERFORMATIVITY, AND IMAGE

by

MARTA KELLEHER
(Under the Direction of Susan Thomas)

ABSTRACT

The experiences and careers of transgender musicians have been monumental both in the history of music and the ongoing rights movement surrounding transgender, genderqueer, and gender non-conforming people. This document explores the careers of three transgender musicians–Laura Jane Grace of Against Me!, Lucas Silveira of The Cliks, and Our Lady J–as case studies representing disparate genres and unique experiences. Exploring sonic elements (vocal production and timbre, musical style, and lyrics) and cultural considerations (visual presentation, media image, and musical community contexts), this thesis discusses the ways in which these vocalists construct and articulate their non-conforming, multifaceted gender identities through their work.

INDEX WORDS: Transgender, Gender non-conforming, Genderqueer, Laura Jane Grace, Against Me!, Lucas Silveira, The Cliks, Our Lady J, Gospel of Dolly
A GOSPEL FOR THE GODLESS:
THE ARTICULATION OF TRANSGENDER MUSICAL IDENTITIES
THROUGH VOICE, PERFORMATIVITY, AND IMAGE

by

MARTA KELLEHER
B.A., Ithaca College, 2012

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA
2015
A GOSPEL FOR THE GODLESS:
THE ARTICULATION OF TRANSGENDER MUSICAL IDENTITIES
THROUGH VOICE, PERFORMATIVITY, AND IMAGE

by

MARTA KELLEHER

Major Professor: Susan Thomas

Committee: Adrian Childs
Emily Frey

Electronic Version Approved:

Julie Coffield
Interim Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2015
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would have been entirely impossible without the help and support of many great mentors and friends. My deepest gratitude goes out to my committee for their insights, suggestions, and valuable time. Many thanks in particular to Dr. Thomas, whose unwavering patience through countless rounds of editing and reworking made this document happen. Credit is due to my incredible colleagues for their guidance and support as both mentors and friends – as proven through their reliable happy hour attendance. Thank you to my wonderful mom, to Pedro, and to my friends for your patience and encouragement. Lastly, the greatest thanks of all to these musicians for sharing their stories, journeys, and music with the world.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</th>
<th>iv</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTERS

1. **TRANSGENDER DYSPHORIA BLUES: REINVENTING LAURA JANE GRACE** | 29
2. **“I’M YOUR MAN”: CONSTRUCTING LUCAS SILVEIRA’S GENDER IDENTITY THROUGH QUEERING AND COVER SONG** | 55
3. **“A BIT OF BOTH”: OUR LADY J AS A GENDER NONCONFORMING QUEEN** | 92

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONCLUSION</th>
<th>115</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISCOGRAPHY</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIDEOGRAPHY</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1 Syllabic Emphasis in “Scream Until You’re Coughing Up Blood”...........50
Figure 2.1 Timberlake’s Vocal Style in “Cry Me a River”..............................................................79
Figure 2.2 Silveira’s Vocal Style in “Cry Me a River”.................................................................80
INTRODUCTION

Long before transgender musicians were proudly and publicly out, the American musical mainstream toyed with gender bending, drag, and ambiguous identities. From transgressive performers like Prince, David Bowie, and Boy George, to Glam Rock groups such as the New York Dolls and Twisted Sister, to drag queens like Big Freedia, even to musicals such as *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, the boundaries of normalcy in mainstream media have been continuously pushed. The musicians discussed in this thesis, however—Laura Jane Grace, Lucas Silveira, and Our Lady J—are not to be considered mere gender-benders or performers of controversial acts. These artists have committed their lives to full time change, abandoning their genders assigned at birth in favor of other options.

In this document, I discuss the construction and articulation of transgender musicians’ identities through voice and other performative markers of gender, such as stage presence, physical appearance, and public persona. I consider these artists’ self presentations through varying mediums including live performance, studio albums, YouTube videos, and television. Exploring the work of Grace, Silveira, and Our Lady J as specific case studies allows me to discuss theories and explore questions pertaining to a larger body of gender nonconforming musicians through a close look at the careers of a few.

Laura Jane Grace’s transition from male to female in the public spotlight as lead singer of popular punk band, Against Me!, as well as the star of the AOL internet series *True Trans: With*
Laura Jane Grace, has proven controversial given her long-term status as a punk rock idol in a hegemonically masculine genre. Grace visually presents herself as conventionally female, yet her low, gritty masculine voice ruptures this image, creating a disjuncture between voice and body. I consider heteronormative constructions of male and female musical identities and the ways in which Grace adheres to some of these conventions while rejecting others.

Lucas Silveira of Canadian alternative rock band The Cliks, decided to transition from living as female nearly a decade ago, but intentionally occupied an ambiguous gender identity for a number of years prior to beginning hormone replacement therapy. Considering Silveira’s works from his coming out through his gradual voice change, I discuss the ways in which the singer has produced a masculine sound through timbre, inflection, and performance choices. Juxtaposing a variety of YouTube cover song videos uploaded by Silveira across his transition, I also examine the ways in which fans experience and interpret Silveira’s construction of identity through music.

Our Lady J–pianist, singer, and songwriter–has made a career for herself both through her studio recordings and live performance act. Initially transitioning from male to female, Our Lady J presents a hyper-feminized appearance, yet has shifted to identify as somewhere in between male and female. In an exploration of Lady J’s recorded works, I discuss her multiple identities constructed through the transgender narratives in her songs’ lyrics, and through her musical style choices and manipulation of vocal delivery. I also consider her lively parody of heteronormativity in her drag-style live performance of Dolly Parton covers in Our Lady J’s live show, “The Gospel of Dolly.”
The terminology I have chosen to employ in this thesis is suggested by the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) in their document “An Ally’s Guide to Terminology.” The term “transgender” is frequently shortened in this thesis to “trans,” to describe individuals or situations, for example: “trans man,” “trans woman,” “trans people,” “trans community,” and “trans identity.” The term “trans man” refers to an individual who identifies as male, despite having been assigned the female gender at birth, and the reverse applies for the term “trans woman.” That is not to say, however, that this document considers gender to be binary. Individuals who identify as trans, yet not necessarily as specifically male or female are referred to as “gender nonconforming” or “gender queer.” Words I have chosen to exclude, such as “transsexual” and “transgendered,” may appear within citations from earlier works, published prior to contemporary standards for terminology. These terms are not intended for controversial use, but function simply within their contexts as markers of time and progress.

Prior to discussing the specific choices of Laura Jane Grace, Lucas Silveira, and Our Lady J in terms of their individual transitions, I must first discuss some of the issues trans people face regarding to their voices, and the myriad of options that exist presently. For individuals assigned male at birth transitioning to female (“trans women”), the voice is often a point of contention. Many trans women experience a sense of dysphoria with the deep timbre and low pitch of their voices, which are often understood as masculine. The process of altering these voices, however, is less straightforward than that of their trans male counterparts, as estrogen hormone replacement therapy cannot reverse the deepening of the male voice past puberty the

---

way that testosterone can create physiological changes in trans men. While the option of vocal surgery (tracheal shave) exists for trans women, many shy away from this difficult and risky procedure. Instead, trans women seeking to manipulate their vocal timbre often work with voice teachers, vocal therapists, and recorded programs.

According to a study conducted by speech-language pathologists Mary Gorham-Rowan and Richard Morris, many trans women seek to change their voices in terms of pitch and through inflection, cadence, and aerodynamics. While Gorham-Rowan and Morris state that fundamental frequency is the most consciously manipulated factor by trans women, they also note that vocal production may be altered with a forward position of the tongue (resulting in a “thinner” voice), with use of increased breathiness (via Andrews and Schmidt), and also through pitch variability, contour, duration, and intonation. The authors describe these alterations as “internal laryngeal adjustments and/or increased subglottal pressure.” Following these scientific descriptions, one may wonder how trans women successfully apply these vocal adjustments. It is not uncommon for these individuals to seek the assistance of voice teachers and therapists. In doing so, previously infrequently used muscles or laryngeal positionings become stronger, allowing trans women to speak in this new way for longer periods of time without exhausting their voices.

A quick Google search of the phrase, “transgender voice therapy” yields just over two million hits. A program which appears as a top hit from this search is speech language pathologist Kathe Perez’s “30 Day Crash Course” on the trans female voice. “You can learn how to achieve a passable feminine voice in as little as 30 days!,” boasts Perez’s website. This

---

3 Ibid, 252.
system (available both as computer software and now as a smartphone app) and its contemporaries function similarly to vocal-input language programs such as Rosetta Stone, cuing participants to listen and repeat back, eventually training their voice to “pass as a woman.” While these programs may prove fruitful for some, change often does not take place overnight. In her book, *Transgender Voices: Beyond Women and Men*, author Lori B. Girshick quotes a trans woman, Dee, as noting, “It is possible to buy tapes and books on what to do but in the overall like everything else in transition it depends a lot on how motivated and dedicated you are as to how successful you will be.”

Girshick’s book also recounts the experience of Nora, a trans woman who chose a different route for recreating her voice—vocal surgery. Nora explains that as a male, her voice was typically around 130 Hz, a good bit lower than the average female speaking voice, which hovers between 180-250 Hz. (In their study, Gorham-Rowan and Morris found that a minimum of a 180 Hz frequency was required for a voice to be perceived as female.) Doctors told Nora to anticipate a frequency of around 215 Hz after surgery, however, immediately after the completion of her surgery and for approximately a year following, Nora’s voice remained consistently at an extremely high-pitched 315 Hz. Self inflicted damage of coughing and stressing the voice were the only solutions Nora found to effectively lower her pitch, eventually bringing the frequency down to approximately 225 Hz.

__________________________

5 Ibid.
7 Gorham-Rowan and Morris, “Aerodynamic Analysis of Male-to-Female Transgender Voice,” 258.
8 Girshick, *Transgender Voices*, 81.
While many trans women undergo hormone replacement therapy, supplying the body with estrogen, the vocal changes reflected in their trans male counterparts do not take place. In the case of trans men, testosterone thickens and ossifies the vocal folds in a way similar to that of adolescent boys, resulting in a more conventionally masculine sound. For trans women who have already surpassed this voice “drop” in their own childhoods, this thickening (and in puberty, lengthening) of the vocal folds proves irreversible, even with the assistance of hormone replacement therapy. While estrogen therapy in trans women often creates other physiological changes such as breast growth, thinning of body hair, and relaxed, less aggressive demeanors, the hormone is not capable of physically altering the sound of the voice at a physiological level.9

To recap, as individuals transitioning from male to female are not able to alter the sound, pitch, or timbre of their voices by way of hormone replacement therapy, they often explore other venues for doing so. Some trans women may seek coaching or assistance from voice teachers and vocal therapists, or take a similar approach from more affordable programs recorded as software, CDs, or apps. These practices of altering pitch, intonation, cadence, and airflow create changes in sound due to changes in laryngeal positioning. The option of surgery for voice alteration also exists, but as this procedure is costly and implies a certain amount of risk, it is utilized less frequently than voice training programs. Despite these great lengths that many trans women go through to alter their voices, Girshick notes that many continue to feel a sense of dysphoria with their voices, feeling as though their female sound is unconvincing, “contrived,” or “fake.”10 As can be seen in the case of trans female vocalist, Laura Jane Grace, some trans

9 Ibid, 76-7.
10 Ibid, 81.
women choose to forgo any attempts at vocal alteration, either to avoid a “contrived” sound, or, in Grace’s case, as they feel no dysphoria with the pitch and timbre of their natural voice.

For those assigned female at birth transitioning to male, options for vocal change are quite different from those trans women can choose from. Some trans men have noted a change in vocal timbre simply due to their coming out as transgender, prior to beginning any hormone replacement therapy. Most commonly, however, trans men opt to begin testosterone hormone replacement therapy, or “T,” which thickens the vocal folds, lowering the pitch and altering the timbre of the voice irreversibly.

Alexandros N. Constansis’ article, “The Changing Female-To-Male (FTM) Voice,” chronicles the author’s own experiences through trans male transition and his use of testosterone. Constansis discusses his own study conducted on the voices of other trans men using T, juxtaposing his findings with those of other researchers in this area. According to Constansis, most trans men are recommended to begin taking testosterone at the highest possible dosage. Constansis recounts his own experience in which he began taking T at a much lower level than is typically recommended, gradually increasing the dosage over time, with the hope of better preserving his singing voice through the changes. (The author notes that, “There was no research on singing FTM voices during my pre-transition days,” around the early 2000s).

According to Davies and Goldberg (via Constansis), the vocal folds of someone born male are both longer and thicker than those of individuals born female. However, the vocal folds of a trans man on testosterone can thicken, but are not able to grow as long as those of someone

---

11 Lucas Silveira, for instance. See Chapter 2, pp. 55-91.
13 Ibid.
born male. Often times, the journey of a trans man’s vocal transition is unpredictable, rarely smooth or stable.\textsuperscript{14} In his article, Constansis cites potential risks factors of taking testosterone, particularly, the “entrapped voice.” This phenomenon “implies the disturbed analogy between growing vocal folds and the encasing of them in an established laryngeal structure,” due to abruptly ossified laryngeal cartilage. This may result in improperly descended laryngeal positions, somewhere in between adult male and female positions. In these cases, “The resultant voice will sound weak and permanently hoarse and lack the right harmonies.”\textsuperscript{15} 

While Constansis’ self-ethnography based on low-intake hormone replacement therapy can be read only as a speculative generalization, his results proved favorable for trans male vocalists. Constansis noted changes that were more gradual on his lowered dose of T than what most trans men experience, which allowed him to work with the various stages of lowering, in which certain ranges would come and go. Constansis’ study concludes, “male singing transvocality, to anyone who has seriously studied or worked with it, proves to be far more complex than its female counterpart. This is the reason why, whereas we nowadays have many examples of good quality MTF singers, there are so few singing trans men possessing voices of a semi-professional, let alone professional, standard.”\textsuperscript{16}

In his article, “Contours through Covers: Voice and Affect in the Music of Lucas Silveira,” author Elias Krell explores his many interviews with lead singer of the Cliks, Lucas Silveira. Silveira came out as transgender in the early years of The Cliks, but did not begin hormone replacement therapy for many years, in fear of ruining or losing his singing voice. Krell

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. 
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
states, “His doctors could provide little knowledge and no expertise on how T would affect his voice or his singing career.”

Silveira, however, noted changes in both the pitch and timbre of his voice prior to his coming out as transgender, but well before beginning hormone replacement therapy. In an interview with Krell, Silveira states, “I don’t know if I was subconsciously doing it, but I noticed that my voice deepened. I don’t know if it [happened] naturally, I don’t know if it was because of touring, I don’t know what it was. But I even listen to the first album, like from The Cliks’ first album, to the second album to the third album, my voice totally changed [...] the way I looked changed. Like, my face changed.”

While, of course, every transgender individual’s experiences with hormone replacement therapy may be quite different from another’s, the authors above help to provide a generalized view of the likely and common ways in which the voice changes pitch wise and timbrally for trans men undergoing testosterone hormone replacement therapy.

In order to thoroughly explore the identities of Laura Jane Grace, Lucas Silveira, and Our Lady J, artists coming from disparate genres and performance cultures, my approach for this document draws upon many different fields of research and interest. I have explored topics in transgender studies, the intersections of music and gender/queer studies, and scholarship on the voice, as well as work within drag, punk, and popular music communities. In the pages that follow, I discuss these unique areas, my engagement with them, and the ways they have come to enhance and affect my work with these musicians.

---

18 Ibid, 480.
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A relatively new field, scholarship on transgender studies has increased immensely in the last decade. Trans awareness has grown through the beginning of the twenty-first century, as society has become more open toward non-binary gender identities. My work engages with a variety of topics explored by transgender studies, including physiological transition, construction of gender identities, as well as the intersections of trans culture and mainstream society.

Sandy Stone’s paramount essay, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” is considered to have catalyzed a large scholarly interest in transgender studies. Stone’s essay was originally written in 1987 and first presented at the conference “Other Worlds: Questioning Gender and Ethnicity” in Santa Cruz, California, in 1988. Since that time, Stone’s work has been cited by countless transgender scholars. In “A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” Stone notes that transgender individuals often move from one end of a binary to the opposite. She then suggests a non-binary paradigm of gender identity: “In the transsexual as text we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and

---

20 Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle laud the work this way in their text. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, eds., The Transgender Studies Reader (New York: Routledge, 2006).
reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries.”

This revolutionary discussion of gender helped to open a forum for more extensive scholarly dialogue on transgenderism.

In *The Transgender Studies Reader*, editors Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle acknowledge Stone’s contributions in their book’s introduction, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies.” According to Stryker, Stone both encouraged trans individuals to proudly present as gender nonconforming, asserting non-binary identities, while she also sought “to combat the anti-transsexual moralism embedded in certain strands of feminist thought by soliciting a new corpus of intellectual and creative work capable of analyzing and communicating to others the concrete realities of changing sex.”

Stone’s foundational discussions have paved the way for open discussions of multifaceted gender identities like Our Lady J’s, and intentionally ambiguous identities like Lucas Silveira’s.

Stryker and Whittle’s *Transgender Studies Reader* compiles a variety of essays from different eras in transgender scholarship. In the text’s foreword, Whittle notes that he and Stryker intentionally include works written prior to the 1990s, a time when trans people were mostly considered to be psychologically or medically unsound. Whittle explains the later rejection of these beliefs beginning in the 90s, citing academia as a catalyst for this fundamental shift that allowed trans people to reclaim their bodies and agency in the dialogues surrounding them. In his foreword, Whittle summarizes the aims of the text, stating, “The Transgender Studies Reader


---

22 Ibid, 12.
24 Ibid, 4.
25 Ibid, xii.
is an effort to afford the student and teacher with a passage through the complexities of gender theory.”

Following Whittle’s foreword, Stryker’s introduction unpacks the goals of transgender scholarship, stating:

Most broadly conceived, the field of transgender studies is concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist between the biological specificity of the sexually differentiated human body, the social roles and statuses that a particular form of body is expected to occupy, the subjectively experienced relationship between a gendered sense of self and social expectations of gender-role performance, and the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood.

A quick glance at the Reader’s table of contents shows a reflection of these tenets, as the editors focus on a range of topics from early to current transgender studies, featuring a variety of ideas including embodiment, the gender spectrum, and identity politics. Susan Stryker is also known for her additional works that have contributed to a foundation of studies in the field, such as The Transgender Studies Reader 2, Transgender History, and her contributions as co-editor of the Transgender Studies Quarterly journal.

---

26 Ibid, xiv.
27 Ibid, 3.
The writing of Nicholas M. Teich, author of *Transgender 101: A Simple Guide to a Complex Issue*, has recently arisen as a new and divergent style of transgender scholarship. In the book’s introduction, Teich states his aim for accessibility. *Transgender 101*, he notes, focuses on basic questions cisgender individuals might have about transgender experiences. Teich’s work strives to fill what he found to be a need for “a reasonably short, concise introduction to the topic, aimed at a wide audience,” which prior to *Transgender 101*, “simply did not exist.” Teich’s writing is uncomplicated and straightforward, outlining basics of transgenderism such as terminology, the transition process, trans issues, and gender queerness. His style of writing reaches out to individuals who are unfamiliar with trans culture and seek a fundamental understanding of transgenderism, as opposed to more intensively historical or analytical texts. Teich’s approach is well equipped to deliver concise and simple explanations on transgenderism and trans culture for mainstream fans of the artists I discuss, who would be unlikely to consult more complex and scholarly sources for information.

The foreword to *Transgender 101* is written by Jamison Green, author of *Becoming a Visible Man*, an account of his own transition. Green applauds Teich’s style, noting, “Nick’s straightforward approach casts light on the social realities of trans people in America without unduly burdening the reader with personality particularities. Yet he also manages to convey the humanity of his subject.” The publication of a work like Teich’s reflects a demand for more

---

31 Ibid, xiii-xiv.
33 Teich, *Transgender 101*, x.
mainstream writing on transgender studies, with an increased interest in transgender topics on a more accessible level.

Jamison Green also appears as a foreword writer for Lori B. Girshick’s *Transgender Voices: Beyond Women and Men*. Girshick’s perspective is unique, in that she is cisgender, unlike many of the prominent writers in the trans studies field. Her work in *Transgender Voices* is based not on personal experience, but on her detailed survey of 150 transgender participants. In Green’s words, “Girshick takes on the difficult task of describing and explaining the complexity beyond the common labels that trans people have been struggling with for the past century or more [...] She offers readers trans people speaking in their own voice about identity, coming out, passing, sexual orientation, relationship negotiations, and the dynamics of attraction, homophobia, and bullying.” Girshick’s outsider perspective offers an insightful approach through the thoughtful collection of information on trans culture and experiences, that is helpful for researchers like myself.

Differing greatly from cultural and theoretical studies on transgender communities and identities, many medical studies have been published on the physiological changes of gender transition. In order to fully understand trans people’s physiological options for transition and the potential effects resulting in voice change, it is necessary to consider scientific insight and findings. Laura Erickson-Schroth’s, *Trans Bodies Trans Selves: A Resource for the Transgender Community*, covers myriad health topics on transition, both physical and mental. A psychiatrist

---

35 Ibid, x.
herself, Erickson-Schroth states, “one of my personal goals for activism is to help lead the fight against pathologization of trans identities.”

Many smaller case studies focusing on specific issues in physiological transition have also been published as part of both medical and transgender scholarship. In this thesis, I have included research conducted by speech language pathologists/communication disorder specialists Mary Gorham-Rowan and Richard Morris, from their article, “Aerodynamic Analysis of Male-to-Female Transgender Voice.” Completed in 2005, Gorham-Rowan and Morris’s study analyzes various factors of how a feminine voice is created by those transitioning from male to female. Although the article does not discuss music, its explorations of timbre, vocal manipulation, and air use are directly applicable to the singing choices made by transgender vocalists.

Offering an account that bridges the gap between physiological and cultural trans studies, Alexandros N. Constansis’ essay, “The Changing Female-To-Male (FTM) Voice,” documents the author’s experiences as a transman and singer beginning testosterone therapy. Constansis describes the resulting vocal changes he experienced on low-dose, gradual use of testosterone. Additionally, the author discusses a study he conducted with 15 other FTM individuals beginning hormone replacement therapy. As Lucas Silveira has said little regarding the physiology of his own transition and his experiences with testosterone, Constansis’ work

37 Ibid, xi.
39 The study contained 13 MtF participants between the ages of 24-55, individuals identifying as female for 6 months to 18 years (252).
provides a view into a private, internal world, documented by a singer familiar with the functions of his own voice.

This wide variety of writings in transgender research—historical chronologies, scholarly explorations, interviews, accessible readers, medically based studies—all help to better inform my research on transgender musicians, their possible experiences, and their physiological options regarding manipulation and bodily change in voice. Moving forward, I explore the areas where gender studies intersect with ethno/musicology and how these interdisciplinary discussions have opened forums for exploration of artists like those my work considers.

The intersection of gender studies and musicology in contemporary scholarship often referred to as a subsect of “New Musicology” has greatly expanded the consideration of topics of feminism, gender, and masculine hegemony in musicological research. Susan McClary’s paramount work, *Feminine Endings*, which addresses musical construction of gender, gendered analyses of music and theory, and narratives of gender and sexuality in music, helped to catalyze this new dialogue in musicology. With the open discussion of these progressive topics, many scholars have followed in McClary’s wake, exploring more deeply the intersections of gender and music. Suzanne Cusick and Ruth Solie, for instance, have both written extensively on women’s roles and histories in relation to Western art music and its surrounding culture. Ellen Koskoff’s work has helped to further explore feminist topics and women’s experiences cross-culturally and globally. *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, a collection of essays edited by Philip Brett, Gary C. Thomas, and Elizabeth Wood, was originally

---

published in 1994, and is now in its second edition.\textsuperscript{42} The work brought to the table a host of new voices, tied in with New Musicology and feminist interests yet expanded to consider performativity, gender roles, and expectations in regard to sexuality. With the growth of New Musicology and subsequent interest in progressive topics, many scholars have begun to consider specific facets of gender and sexuality in recent years, including relationships to performativity, music making, and identity.

Similarly crucial to music and gender studies have been Judith Butler’s works theorizing and exploring the construction of gender as performative. Many music scholars have responded to Butler’s 1999 work, \textit{Gender Trouble}, which theorizes gender as a performative act.\textsuperscript{43} Musicologists have both expanded upon the book’s tenets and reacted against its bold assertions. Butler, herself, has further explained and expanded upon her original work in \textit{Gender Trouble}, in her later text, \textit{Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”}.\textsuperscript{44} My work throughout this thesis draws heavily on Butler’s discussions of performativity, transgression of biological assignment, and the rejection of gender as a binary assignment.

Musicologist and author Freya Jarman-Ivens has been heavily influenced by Butler’s innovations. Her book, \textit{Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw}, explores the musical voice as potentially uncanny, resulting in queer disjunctures between voice and body, singer and listener.\textsuperscript{45} Jarman-Ivens furthers Butler’s assertion of gender performativity,

\begin{flushright}

\textsuperscript{43} Judith Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble} (New York: Routledge, 1999).

\textsuperscript{44} Judith Butler, \textit{Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”} (New York: Routledge, 2007).

\end{flushright}
claiming that, although voice is not visible, it is “nonetheless complicit in the theatrics of gender, and a voice that does not comply with the visible signs of gender is as disruptive to the performance of gender as any other, silent sign could be.” My work considers Jarman-Ivens’ discussions of the uncanny, particularly in relation to the disjuncture between Laura Jane Grace’s voice and body. This thesis has also benefitted greatly from the dialogues on masculine hegemony and its musical manifestations in pop, discussed in depth in the articles presented in Jarman-Ivens’ collection, Oh Boy! Masculinities and Popular Music.

Annette Schlichter takes Judith Butler to task in her essay, “Do Voices Matter? Vocality, Materiality, Gender Performativity.” Criticizing Butler for neglecting to address the voice as a performative aspect of gender, Schlichter writes, “Because Butler focuses on the picture of gender, while excluding the voice as one of the relevant aspects of ‘significant corporeality’ [...] gender trouble remains fully contained by the logic of the visual.” Schlicter’s continuation of Butler’s work, which contains considerations of the voice as part of gender performativity, has greatly influenced the work in this document, as Laura Jane Grace, Lucas Silveira, and Our Lady J all consciously control the sounds of their voices to create particular timbres and to carefully construct their identities as trans individuals and musical performers.

Popular music scholar Stan Hawkins has also written extensively on the relationship between gender and music. Hawkins utilizes performativity studies to articulate the ways in which musicians construct queer identities through their work. His chapter, “On Male Queering

40 Ibid, 20.
49 Ibid, 33.
in Mainstream Pop,” from *Queering the Popular Pitch*, “seeks to consider masculinity within a queer context by underlining the strategy of queering and its exploitative rendering in pop culture.”\(^{50}\) Hawkins further contextualizes these studies of the musical queering of masculinity in his article, “[Un]*Justified*: Gestures of Straight-Talk in Justin Timberlake’s Songs,” by critically analyzing the recordings and performances of Justin Timberlake’s early solo career.\(^{51}\) This document expands upon Hawkins’ Timberlake analysis by putting the text in dialogue with Lucas Silveira’s transgender covers of two Timberlake works.

The vast amount of topics resulting at the intersection of gender/queer studies and musicological research allow in-depth explorations of many styles of music, performances, and constructions of identity. Having hinted previously at connections between gender studies and vocal embodiment in my discussions of Jarman-Ivens’ and Schlichter’s works, I will continue on to discuss the major tenets of the field of voice studies, looking at the interdisciplinary intersections of voice studies and gender/queer studies.

The relatively young and emerging field of voice studies has expanded with explorations of a wide variety of interdisciplinary topics in recent years. Interests in the voice range from musical, performative, and perceptual, to scientific, physiological, and neurological. Some writers discuss the production of voice, while others focus on its reception. My work draws upon both physiological vocal constructions and processes as well as their reception and interpretations by listeners.

---

Roland Barthes’ paramount article, “The Grain of the Voice,” published in 1977, is considered by many to have catalyzed a new interest in vocal timbre and affect. Barthes describes “grain” as an element beyond timbre, claiming that “the significance it opens cannot better be defined, indeed, than by the very friction between the music and something else, which something else is the particular language (and nowise the message).” Countless authors have been influenced by Barthes theory of grain, inspiring increasing amounts of scholarship on the importance of vocal quality and its reception.

Ethnomusicologist Cornelia Fales’ article “The Paradox of Timbre,” identifies the great difficulties in the description of both vocal and instrumental timbre. Fales argues that timbre is often weakly described in writing. She asserts, “We have a peculiar amnesia in regard to timbre, but we’re not deaf to timbre: we hear it, we use it—no one has much trouble telling instruments apart—but we have no language to describe it.” Many voice studies specialists have expanded upon topics introduced by Fales. Nina Eidsheim’s work, for instance, centers around performativity of timbre, voice and identity, and the perception of vocal timbres as racialized.

As vocal timbre can inspire preconceived notions in listeners—a singer’s age, race, gender, experiences—studies of the ways in which timbre is used by singers to communicate meaning pertain directly to my work on the construction of trans identities through voice. Laura Jane Grace’s rough, gritty voice is perceived by many as masculine, although the singer asserts that she sounds like a woman. Lucas Silveira has intentionally manipulated the timbre of his

53 Ibid, 185.
55 Ibid, 57.
voice to sound more masculine, eventually altering its sound at the physiological level through his use of testosterone. Our Lady J manipulates the timbre of her voice to perform the different characters in her songs’ narratives. Undoubtedly, considerations of vocal timbre can enliven a discussion of the ways in which these artists are able to portray themselves and articulate meaning through their singing.

Nina Eidsheim and her voice studies colleague, Katherine Meizel, are collaborating as co-editors of the *Oxford Handbook of Voice Studies*, forthcoming in 2015. The editors plan to cultivate a collection of essays aiming to: “1) address the question *what is voice?*, 2) affirm the development of voice studies as a transdisciplinary field of inquiry, and 3) establish a dialogue to foster a more complete understanding of voice and its meanings.” This text will function as one of the first, prominent collections of voice studies articles focused within a musical context, drawing upon interdisciplinary fields, “including musicology, ethnomusicology, performance, medicine, speech science, linguistics, comparative literature, psychology, broadcasting, gender and Queer studies, disability studies, and media studies.”

Jody Kreiman’s and Diana Van Lancker Sidtis’ text, *Foundations of Voice Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Voice Production and Perception*, also a collection of studies pertaining to voice, focuses on a wider range of topics outside of a musical lens. The authors explore issues in voice studies ranging from physiological production of voice, perception of unfamiliar voices, voice and projection of identity, to neurological functions of perception.

---

57 Ibid.
Writings on vocal timbre and affect paired with physiological and perceptual research, such as that presented by Kreiman and Sidtis, fosters more in-depth studies of voice, identity, and meaning in music. Kreiman and Sidtis’ work engages with Gorham-Rowan and Morris’ article discussed earlier in light of transgender studies, “Aerodynamic Analysis of Male-to-Female Transgender Voice.” Considered in conjunction, the manipulations of voice introduced by Gorham-Rowan and Morris can be explained through Kreiman and Sidtis’ physiological explanation of the production of a singing voice.

The work of many gender and sexuality scholars has overlapped into the voice studies arena. Gender theorists, performance theorists, and (ethno)musicologists alike have contributed to voice studies scholarship where the fields intersect. Freya Jarman-Ivens’ book *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw* identifies voice as a site for queering, as she explores meaning and occurrences in the music of singers Karen Carpenter, Maria Callas, and Diamanda Galás.59 In the text’s introduction, Jarman-Ivens asserts, “It is this central feature of the voice–its operation in a kind of “third space” between the voicer and the listener–and the importance of identification both with and against the voice on the part of the listener that, I will argue, make it a particularly intense site for the emergence of queer.”60 My work engages with Jarman-Ivens’ contribution toward Judith Butler’s gender performativity theory, as Jarman-Ivens suggests that voice can be investigated as a performative marker of gender.61

Many other authors have theorized the queer voice and its articulations in musical performance. In his essay, “Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres,” Yvon Bonenfant explores

59 Freya Jarman-Ivens, *Queer Voices.*
60 Ibid, 3-4.
the questions, “What might it mean to have or hear a queer vocal timbre? Can such a concept be of any real use to us?” Scholar such as musicologist Shana Goldin-Perschbacher and gender theorist Judith Halberstam have affirmed the usefulness of queer vocal timbre study through their writings. Goldin-Perschbacher discusses how the vulnerable intimacy of Jeff Buckley’s voice results in queer readings of his music in her article, “‘Not with You But of You’: ‘Unbearable Intimacy’ and Jeff Buckley’s Transgendered Vocality,” and Halberstam traces gender variance in popular music history in “Queer Voices and Musical Genders.”

The work of performance studies theorist Elias Krell examines the voice as a “sonic lens” for physiological experiences of singers transitioning gender and sex. This thesis dialogues closely with Krell’s largely ethnographic writing on Lucas Silveira, in his article, “Contours through Covers: Voice and Affect in the Music of Lucas Silveira.” Krell asserts that the cover song can function as a safe space for trans artists to explore their changing voices. While I agree with this assertion, my work argues that Lucas Silveira consciously manipulates his recreations. I argue that Silveira depicts his identity through musical decisions that differ from original artists’ inflections, lyrics, ranges, styles, (etc.), constructing images of queerness or heteronormativity with and against the original works.

---

Voice allows transgender musicians to construct their gender identities musically. Because voice can be understood by listeners in gendered ways, analyses of gender performance can be enriched by inclusion of discussions of vocal affect. Drawing topics from and creating questions in response to the work in these fields and their intersections allows my research to explore the voices of transgender singers through interdisciplinary lenses that consider voice as a key factor in identity. Continuing, I shift lenses to describe the cultural context of the punk music scene, upon which an analysis of Laura Jane Grace’s trans and punk identity can be built.

There is a great divide between the two main bodies of scholarship on punk rock culture and music. The first of these emerged just after the explosion of punk’s popularity in the late 1970s, and continued to the end of the twentieth century. Landmark works such as Dave Laing’s One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock, as well as Dick Hebdige’s Subculture: The Meaning of Style, focus on punk music and culture in England in the late 1970s. The early 1990s saw the contribution of two more critical works on punk, Jon Savage’s England’s Dreaming, which documents the history of the rise of punk by way of the Sex Pistols, as well as Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20th Century by Greil Marcus, a discussion of punk and other counterculture movements and their influences. Laing, Savage, and Marcus, all music journalists known for their works in the broad realm of popular music commentary, wrote from a mainstream perspective for a general audience. These early works in

---

the field were among the first to critique punk culture and theory through a scholarly lens, analyzing the progression of punk music and its roots.

In *The Philosophy of Punk*, originally published in 1999 and now in its fourth printing, author Craig O’Hara criticizes this first school of punk scholarship.\(^{70}\) O’Hara asserts that many authors are limited by their focus on only the best known groups of the movement, such as the Sex Pistols.\(^{71}\) He argues further, “most [books] lack a great deal of information, as they were done by writers who were not part of the movement, but outside interpreters.”\(^{72}\) This favoring of insider scholarship outlines the main principle of the second body of punk scholarship, emerging at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

*Punk Rock: So What?*, a collection of essays edited by Roger Sabin features contributors from diverse fields and backgrounds. In the book’s introduction, Sabin explains his decision to exclude many of punk studies “big name” authors: “This was not out of any disrespect for their work: on the contrary, they were responsible for putting serious discussions of punk on the map [...] Rather, my feeling as editor was, very simply, that a new approach to the subject required new voices to be heard.”\(^{73}\)

This fresh approach is valued both by Sabin and many of his contemporaries. Lars J. Kristiansen, Joseph R. Blaney, Philip J. Chidester, and Brent K. Simonds, coauthors of *Screaming for Change: Articulating a Unifying Philosophy of Punk Rock*, articulate three


\(^{71}\) Specifically, O’Hara notes Patricia Henry’s *Break All Rules! Punk Rock and the Making of a Style*.

\(^{72}\) Ibid, 25.

separate trajectories in earlier punk scholarship—punk as subculture, punk as a musical genre, punk as an authentic lived experience. The authors argue that this incohesive approach contributed to a failed attempt at a unified methodology for punk scholarship.\textsuperscript{74}

O’Hara, Sabin and his contributors, and Kristiansen, Blaney, Chidester, and Simonds together have created a new kind of punk scholarship, drawing from what they consider to be more authentic insider experiences of the culture, music, and activism of punk life than their predecessors. In the introduction to \textit{Punk Rock: So What?}, Sabin explains his aim to relocate punk in cultural history by problematizing earlier analyses, and through exploring areas that have been previously ignored or excluded.\textsuperscript{75} O’Hara’s work also strives towards this ideal, as he draws upon little known fanzine sources in order to, “produce an accurate picture of the philosophy of modern Punk,”\textsuperscript{76} taking these sources as primary accounts.

In my research, these recent texts are particularly useful for understanding the cultural context of Laura Jane Grace’s transition. As a general history has been outlined through the publications of the first wave of punk writers, the newer insider-based texts offer deeper insight into lesser-known pockets of the culture’s beliefs and norms surrounding sexual identity and gender roles. Unfortunately, however, neither the first or second generation of punk scholars focus significantly on the musical factors contributing to the punk sound, nor do they analyze typical aspects of performance and the implications of presentation, gesture, and appearance in punk music and culture.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid, 2.
\textsuperscript{76} O’Hara, \textit{The Philosophy of Punk}, 34.
Works that address gender, performativity, and masculine hegemony often look closely at specific groups as case studies. One example is popular music scholar Caroline O’Meara’s article, “The Raincoats: Breaking down Punk Rock's Masculinities.” In this work, O’Meara explores the visual and aural performances of femininity in the all-female punk band, The Raincoats.\(^77\) Although this work appears in the academic journal *Popular Music*, and is O’Meara’s only work specifically related to punk, the author is able to make larger cultural assertions through her close study of one group’s music. Popular music expert Simon Frith deals mostly indirectly with punk music in his many analytical collections on performativity in popular music. For example, Frith’s text, *Performing Rites: On The Value of Popular Music*, uses the work of British punk band X-Ray Spex in his chapter on voice and embodiment.\(^78\) This thesis also discusses concepts found in Frith’s works, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock’n’Roll*\(^79\) and *Sound and Vision: The Music Video Reader*.\(^80\)

While many texts referenced in this document do not address punk music as their sole topic, a variety look at sonic and performative trends amongst rock music as a whole, discussing the hegemony of masculinity and the way it is performed. For instance, Jacqueline Warwick’s essay, “Singing Style and White Masculinity,” focuses largely on the voice of Nickelback’s

---


Chad Kroeger. Warwick uses the rock artist as an example of a larger, overarching trope found in many rock music styles and subcultures. Many of the characteristics described in Warwick’s work can be considered in critical discussion of artists in punk genres as well.

The overlapping areas of scholarship on the history of punk music, the ideologies of punk culture, and the way rock music elements manifest in subgenres such as punk all help to inform my discussions on both the aural and visual performances of gender by Laura Jane Grace, as well as her relationship to punk culture.

By taking an interdisciplinary approach—considering fields of ethno/musicology, gender and queer studies, scholarship on the voice, transgender studies, and the cultures behind particular musical genres—I aim to inform my discussion of transgender vocalists from as many relevant perspectives and dialogues as possible. The following chapters look closely at Laura Jane Grace, Lucas Silveira, and Our Lady J to uncover the musical ways in which they construct their trans and nonconforming identities. Considering the reception and interpretation of these artists within their own cultural musical communities, I consider each artist’s environment as context for their creation of transgressive identities in mainstream genres. The voices of Laura Jane Grace, Lucas Silveira, and Our Lady J have increased awareness of the transgender community and its struggles with rights and equality. By exploring the contributions of these musicians, I hope to inspire new discussions within the fields of ethno/musicology that consider the multifaceted nature of gender and its relationship to musical expression and communication.

---

“You’ve got no cunt in your strut, you’ve got no hips to shake. And you know it’s obvious, but we can’t choose how we’re made.”

Laura Jane Grace sounds exactly the way she used to… when she was Tom Gabel. The lead singer of the popular punk band Against Me! publicly announced his intentions to transition genders and begin living as a woman in May 2012. In January of 2014, the band released their first album since Grace’s transition, entitled, “Transgender Dysphoria Blues.” While Grace has begun to present publicly as a woman and is currently undergoing hormone replacement therapy, the singer’s vocal timbre remains consistent with its harsh, gritty sound on Against Me!’s previous albums.

The following pages explore Laura Jane Grace’s construction of a trans female identity in the punk community, a musical world dominated by masculinity. Although Grace has made no intentional efforts to alter the pitch or sound of her deep, raspy shout, she maintains that she still sounds like a woman. I seek to uncover how Laura Jane Grace constructs her identity in a male-dominated music scene by considering gender performativity, vocal affect, cultural norms, and media representation. This chapter begins with a discussion of the gendered expectations of

---

82 Against Me!, “Transgender Dysphoria Blues,” on Transgender Dysphoria Blues, Total Treble, 2014, CD.
83 Against Me!, “Transgender Dysphoria Blues.”
voice and an exploration of the voice as a site for gender performativity. The paradoxical disjuncture between Grace’s “masculine” voice and “feminine” body draws out further discussion of cultural, hegemonic norms; I explore the potential of Grace’s voice as being both deceptive to listeners and as a form of shared queer identity. Looking closely at the hegemony of masculinity in punk (and at rock music more generally) and how signifiers of such identities manifest in performance and stage presence, I draw on audio and visual recordings from the entirety of Against Me!’s career, analyzing filming, editing, and production decisions that emphasize Grace’s gender identity, and how these choices contribute to an image of the artist that attempts to fit heteronormative cultural expectations. As one of the first major musical icons to come out as transgender, Laura Jane Grace and her experiences provide a glimpse into the journeys of genderqueer individuals, their constructions of identity, and the ways in which these identities are interpreted in mainstream culture.

**What does a woman sound like?**

Against Me!’s first album, a self-titled demo, was originally released in 1997. After the announcement of Laura Jane Grace’s transition, many long-time fans were concerned that the timbre of the singer’s voice would change greatly from the trademark gritty hollering associated with early Against Me! music. In a radio interview for the Kevin and Bean Show, the hosts asked Grace whether or not she was concerned about potential changes in her voice. To their surprise, she recognized her voice already as the product of change stating, “No. My voice has […]"
undergone many changes over the years just from wear and tear.” From the band’s earlier albums, such as Against Me! Is Reinventing Axl Rose (2002), up to later publications like New Wave (2007) subtle changes can be detected in (then) Gabel’s voice and its use. While Reinventing Axl Rose contains a significant amount of screaming on nearly every song, New Wave makes use of more sustained singing, Gabel’s voice sounding lower, even more mature.

During the Kevin and Bean Show interview, host Kevin Ryder bluntly inquired, “Why is your voice so similar to how it used to be? I think a lot of people would be expecting you to sound more like a woman.” In reply, Grace mused, “Well, what does a woman sound like, you know? That’s all interpretive or opinion, but I mean my voice is my voice, I don’t feel ashamed of my voice in any way and especially with my singing voice.” In the years since her coming out, Grace has continued to stand by the integrity of her voice, refusing to alter its pitch or timbre to fulfill gender-normative conventions.

In the many interviews given since her coming out, Grace has made a point of reassuring Against Me! listeners that her harsh, guttural timbre would not be lost with her transition. “The [hormone replacement therapy] won’t change my voice […] only surgery can do that–but I like my singing voice, so I don’t really care about that.” As was discussed in the introductory chapter, females transitioning to male may notice changes in vocal timbre from testosterone, but those transitioning from male to female do not experience a vocal shift at a physiological level.

85 Against Me!, Against Me! Is Reinventing Axl Rose, No Idea Records, 2002, CD.
86 Against Me!, New Wave, Sire Records, 2007, CD.
87 “Kevin & Bean Interview Against Me!,” YouTube.
Although Grace has chosen not to, some transgender individuals opt for voice-changing surgeries, such as tracheal shaves, while others may seek professional voice coaching from certified speech therapists and healthcare groups such as the American Speech-Language Hearing Association, who offer therapy geared specifically towards those in the process of gender transition.

Perhaps uninformed about the minimal effects of hormone replacement therapy on a trans woman’s voice, Shaw TV interviewer Tracy Koga insisted, “Just the sound in your voice is different in this one. There’s a lot of, I think, raw emotion in this new album.” Laughing off the matter, Grace complied, “Sure, yeah. I think maybe the sound of my voice has more been affected by years of smoking cigarettes and drinking whiskey, but you know, sure.” Here, Koga implies “raw emotion” as a characteristic of what she hears to be Grace’s new sound. The unrestrained expression of feelings has long been associated with women’s musical performance, while, conversely, men have been lauded for stoic and controlled performance. Stan Hawkins asserts, “It is well known that the regulation of emotional display through all forms of artistic expression determines the tightly regulated behavioral patterns in males.” If, then, Grace’s music comes across as more emotive than it was prior to her transition, listeners may be

---

understanding Grace’s expressiveness as a new, feminine performance characteristic. Possibly unknowingly, Koga connects unabashed displays of emotion to markers of femininity, implying a change in Grace’s voice beyond just pitch range.

Returning to Grace’s question, *What does a woman sound like?* highlights an interesting point of contention: is the gendering of voice physiologically constructed, or instead, performed? Judith Butler’s paramount work *Gender Trouble* theorizes gender as a performative act, rather than a biological assignment. In her article, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” Butler states:

> If gender is drag, and if it is an imitation that regularly produces the ideal it attempts to approximate, then gender is a performance that produces the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it produces on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait (that array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender presentation), the illusion of an inner depth.\(^93\)

In this case, if gender is to be read as an illusion of “corporeal theatrics,” Grace’s voice becomes an interesting subject. Could Grace not simply abandon the mannerisms and inflections of her previous years spent as male–aggressive performance posturing, head banging, her gritty shouting voice–instead acting out a role more socially expected of a woman? Freya Jarman-Ivens calls these issues to question in her book, *Queer Voices*. In response to Butler, Jarman-Ivens asks:

---

Might we not suggest, then, that vocal femininity is also “a lot of work”? And might we not therefore also suggest that the voice be included in those “corporeal theatrics understood as gender presentation”? Although it is less visible, the voice is nonetheless complicit in the theatrics of gender, and a voice that does not comply with the visible signs of gender is as disruptive to the performance of gender as any other, silent sign could be.  

Here, Jarman-Ivens directly identifies one of the great paradoxes of the way in which Laura Jane Grace currently presents herself. Although Grace has adapted her visual appearance to present as female, her voice remains unchanged. She is authentic in her musical integrity, upholding a consistent sound across Against Me!’s output, yet seemingly inauthentic in her female performance of gender. While Grace’s visual appearance is conventionally feminine, the sound of her voice disrupts listeners’ expectations. To further understand the ways in which Grace presents both conventionally masculine performance traits alongside her feminine appearance and identity, it is necessary to consider the particular elements that constitute masculine performativity. The following section explores traits commonly linked with masculine musical performance, considering Grace’s use of these markers despite her female identity.

---

The Meanings of Masculinity

The subcultures of the punk genre are highly divisive, and it is not possible to account for all punk culture enthusiasts under one socio-political umbrella. While some subgroups are associated with hate and violence (Skinhead culture, for instance, is frequently associated with neo-Nazism), positive and activist subcultures (such as Queer Punk, for example) exist on the opposite end of the spectrum. Despite the fact that punk is known for its counterculture ideals, sometimes refuting gender norms, by and large, punk’s most prominent and successful bands are mostly (if not entirely) male—and quite conventionally so.

In his book, *The Philosophy of Punk*, Craig O’Hara devotes an entire chapter to the state of gender and sexuality issues in the punk community. At the chapter’s offset, O’Hara acknowledges the existence of sexism in the community, however, he notes “it is on a smaller level than in the mainstream, and more importantly, it is discouraged and condemned by many active participants.” To refute gender discrimination, unfortunately, has not been sufficient in creating a level playing field for female punk musicians, who exist in noticeably smaller numbers than their male counterparts. For instance, *Rolling Stone*’s “Readers Poll: The Best

---


97 Ibid, 102.
Punk Rock Bands of All Time,“ features ten all-male groups.98 LA Weekly’s list of “Top 20 Punk Albums in History,” isn’t much better.99

O’Hara notes that displays of power in male musicians often stem from their unemotional, serious self-presentation.100 He continues, “As much as men do not want to relinquish that power, many women seek to gain it by adopting stereotypically male characteristics. “101 Caroline O’Meara’s article, “The Raincoats: Breaking down Punk Rock’s Masculinities,” identifies some of these characteristics, including “loud, guttural singing and aggressive stage posturing” as distinctively male elements of punk performance.102 O’Meara notes that this “macho posturing” can exist both in the performance and lyrics of punk. The author expands the periphery of her discussion to include “ejaculatory discharges of heavy metal's guitar solos,” and “pounding thrusts of standard rock beats,” as more Western markers of masculinity in music.103

In an interview with National Public Radio’s Rachel Martin, Laura Jane Grace explained her past performances of masculinity in her years lived as Tom Gabel:

[...] that's where the disconnect was happening for me: being on stage and being featured in magazines where you're essentially competing with other male singers. Rock 'n' roll, or

100 Ibid, 104.
101 Ibid, 105.
103 Ibid, 303.
punk rock, it's a boy's club in a lot of ways, and you're out there with your photo side-by-side with these other people that you're supposed to measure up to. And I didn't. I wasn't one of those dudes. So it felt like more and more pressure to be someone I wasn’t.104

In the subsequent time following her transition, Grace’s anxieties have been ameliorated by her change in presentation. She states, “Deciding to transition has been really liberating as an artist, especially on stage. I feel like it's just okay to be me and I don't have to measure up to some popular perception of what a ‘front man’ does. Which before had been extremely dysphoria inducing.”105 Here, and in many other interviews, Grace has expressed the discomfort she experienced appearing on stage while presenting as a man, locked into a preset paradigm of how male rock artists are expected to behave. The following pages address the hegemony of masculinity in rock music, specifically noting how gender functions in punk culture.

Many of the sonic masculine style characteristics suggested by O’Meara can be heard in Against Me!’s recordings, such as their song, “Walking Is Still Honest,” from the band’s 2002 album, Reinventing Axl Rose.106 The track begins with a simple, three-note melody outlined by the electric bass. The heavily distorted electric guitar maintains the harmony, while the driving tomtom is hit sharply on the and of every beat. Gabel107 enters after a four bar introduction, his sound more aptly described as shouting than as singing. The song’s lyrics are almost entirely incomprehensible, masked by the grit of the singer’s voice. Although the melody of the verses in

105 Grace, “Ask Me Anything.”
107 Grace’s surname prior to her transition.
“Walking Is Still Honest” spans only a perfect fourth (D4 to G4), Gabel’s voice strains to reach even the top of this modest range, and the higher he sings, the more gravely and distorted the notes become. The back of Gabel’s throat sounds tightly constricted, pushing forward to produce the “guttural” scream described by O’Meara.

The lyrics of “Walking Is Still Honest” recalls O’Meara’s assertions of textual “macho posturing.” During the chorus, Gabel sings:

Can anybody tell me why God won’t speak to me?
Why Jesus never called on me to part the fucking seas?
Why death is easier than living?
You can be almost anything, when you’re on your fucking knees.
Not today, not my son, not my family,
Not while walking is still honest.
And you haven’t given up on me.108

These lyrics address themes of hard work and integrity: the protection of family, honesty, and not giving up in the face of life’s uncertainties. Gabel’s use of expletives amps up his macho delivery even more.

Jacqueline Warwick’s article, “Singing Style and White Masculinity,” further explores such topics of integrity and authenticity in rock music. Warwick describes the rock band Nickelback as an example of a highly valued style of vocal production in white, male rock singing. Although Nickelback is not a punk group, many of the performance characteristics identified by Warwick can be identified as male signifiers throughout rock genres at large.

108 Ibid.
Jacqueline Warwick describes Chad Kroeger, Nickelback’s lead vocalist, as a “coarse, gritty baritone,” his voice being “the perfect medium for his brooding, angst-ridden lyrics.” According to the author, this “meat and potatoes” style of singing works to signal the vocalist’s status as “ordinary, hardworking, unconcerned with artistic posturing […] the unvarnished ‘regular guy’ that corresponds with the conceptions of white, heterosexual masculinity as normal and unmarked.” Warwick further notes that this style of vocal delivery is celebrated by Nickelback’s fans for “its sincerity, sexiness and raw passion.”

A 2012 video of Against Me! shows the band performing shortly after Grace’s coming out. Recorded unprofessionally at FYF Fest 2012 in Los Angeles, the band performs their song, “Drinking With The Jocks,” prior to its studio release on Transgender Dysphoria Blues in 2014. Musically, “Drinking With The Jocks” calls to mind Gabel’s sound in “Walking Is Still Honest.” Grace plays a two bar introduction on her loud, heavily distorted guitar. The verse begins with the stiff, quarter note outline of 4/4 meter on tomtoms and cymbals, as bass and rhythm guitar enter. Grace shouts:

I’m drinking with the jocks,

I’m laughing at the faggots.

Just like one of the boys,

---

110 Ibid, 353.
111 Ibid, 352.
113 Against Me!, “Drinking With The Jocks,” on Transgender Dysphoria Blues, Total Treble, 2014, CD.
Swinging my dick in my hand.\textsuperscript{114}

These lyrics, a subversive response to hegemonic masculinity, are spouted out by Grace’s same pressed, strained, and gritty shout from “Walking is Still Honest,” and most of the band’s other tracks. Through using hyper-masculinized lyrics and posturing, Grace’s performance undermines the normalcy of Nickelback’s “unmarked” masculinity, revealing just another form of posturing.

Grace stands front and center, between the band’s rhythm guitarist and bassist. As the camera pans from one end of the stage to the next, it becomes apparent that, despite her short, sleeveless dress, tights, and shoulder length hair, Grace’s posture reflects her band mates’. Grace stands with her feet apart, her head and shoulders somewhat slumped over her guitar. Her right arm moves aggressively as she strums chords; occasionally she steps back from her microphone to bob her head and upper body to the beat.

Laura Jane Grace’s stage presence and vocal timbre adhere to the characteristics of masculinity suggested by O’Meara and Warwick despite her gender transition to female. By that logic, could it be possible to describe Laura Jane Grace as a “meat and potatoes” woman? Warwick’s article describes the Nickelback sound as “ordinary” and “hardworking,” implying integrity and authenticity. I question whether or not this authenticity is invalidated when the “coarse, gritty baritone” sound comes from the mouth of a woman. Grace is an enigma in that, while she presents a relatively conventional female appearance, her singing voice and stage presence remain decidedly masculine. While Against Me! fans value the long-standing integrity of Grace’s unchanged voice, I argue that she no longer fits the paradigm of the “meat and

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
potatoes” vocalist, disqualified from this group not for auditory reasons, but simply because of her identification as female.

As I have described in the preceding section, Laura Jane Grace’s performance style has remained consistent throughout Against Me!’s output, despite her gender transition from male to female. Although Grace herself refutes the conventions of a gender binary, her performances contain many traditional markers of masculinity, creating a disjuncture between the singer’s feminine identification and her appearance during performance. In Grace’s new online series, True Trans, the show’s editors take great care to depict Grace as a feminine woman, often excluding her more conventionally masculine traits. The section that follows looks closely at editing and framing choices in True Trans, considering the ways in which the editors and producers of the series regulate and sculpt Grace’s appearance.

True Trans Soul Rebel

In October of 2014, AOL premiered a new online series, True Trans: With Laura Jane Grace, centered around Grace’s gender transition and the connections she has forged along the way. While the series focuses primarily on the artist’s transition as opposed to her career, she is shown playing solo reductions of her music on guitar, or as part of her band in live performances in each episode. Additionally, Against Me!’s most recent album, Transgender Dysphoria Blues, provides the soundtrack for the entire season of True Trans. Since Grace’s transition to living as a woman, Against Me! has not released any official music videos featuring actual footage of the

---

band members. Aside from a handful of unofficial, fan-uploaded YouTube clips, *True Trans* serves as the only official published performance footage of the entire band in which Grace presents as female. A critical viewing of *True Trans* reveals ways in which Grace’s gender identity is depicted and even enhanced through visual editing and filming choices, and how these choices vary between interview footage and full band performances.

*True Trans* is laid out in a documentary style, alternating between band shots, footage of Grace interacting with others, and clips of isolated interviews. The scenes featuring interview questions with Grace are often framed tightly around her face, either from the chest up, or shoulders up. In many of these scenes, Grace appears to be wearing mascara and sometimes dark eyeliner or shadow. Her skin seems smooth, her eyebrows are neatly manicured, and her long hair is always worn down.

Many times throughout the series, Grace is shown playing solo reductions of Against Me! songs on the guitar. In these scenes, the camera zooms in on Grace’s face–her head is often turned sideways, her hair hanging down over her shoulder as she plays, she never looks directly into the camera. These clips also pan in on close shots of Grace’s hands as she plays, revealing her manicured nails painted a light shade of lavender. Editing choices such as these convey a softer side of Grace, stripped away from the upbeat and aggressive settings of Against Me! shows. She appears as the sensitive singer-songwriter type, revealed in her private world, supposedly free of the costuming and posturing of public performances.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler discusses cultural construction of gender expectations mapped onto sexed bodies:
On some accounts, the notion that gender is constructed suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law. When the relevant “culture” that “constructs” gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny.\textsuperscript{116}

By this set of expectations, if Grace presents a female body, she must follow with additional cultural markers of that gender in order to be perceived and culturally accepted as a woman. Some choices in the ways in which Grace is portrayed in \textit{True Trans} reflect the producers’ inflation of these conventional markers of femininity. The close-up shots revealing Grace’s makeup and manicured hands, as well as her demure posture, seated on a stool as she plays guitar, read as feminine. Furthermore, the decision to film Grace covering Against Me! without her famous vocals (read: male) ward off any signifiers of masculinity that Grace might also embody.

In Episode 7 of \textit{True Trans}, editors juxtapose footage of the present-day Grace against her earlier years as Gabel. In an interview scene, Grace’s made-up face is closely framed as she states, “the threat of violence to transwomen as opposed to transmen speaks a lot to male privilege [...].” Here, the visual cuts to an old clip of an Against Me! performance, in which Gabel is shouting and playing guitar, brow furrowed, dripping with sweat, making blunt, aggressive movements as he plays. Over this image, Grace continues talking: “[...] prior to my transition I didn’t realize what that extended to you and to how misogynist culture is.” The scene

\textsuperscript{116} Butler, Judith, \textit{Gender Trouble} (New York: Routledge, 1999), 12.
ends as the camera then switches back to the closeup of Grace’s face. This comparison of the young, reckless, and aggressive Tom Gabel between two reserved, still shots of the intentionally manicured Laura Jane Grace highlight two very opposite ends of the musician’s existence. The show’s editors pair old footage of Gabel, featuring typical signifiers of maleness (sweat, labor, sharp and harsh movements, a furrowed, serious face), overlaying the image with the words “male privilege,” and “misogyny.” In doing so, the editors juxtapose a hyper-masculinized portrayal of Grace against an astonishingly serene, feminine one.

In addition to interviews and Grace’s solo performance, *True Trans* frequently uses footage of Against Me! in live concerts. These clips always feature the band’s current lineup of personnel performing songs from *Gender Dysphoria Blues*, their most recent album and only release to date following Grace’s transition. Often times, Grace is filmed from behind as fans look up adoringly, singing along to every word. Only infrequently is Grace shown head banging, jumping, or dancing and playing aggressively. Avoiding any lengthy shots of Grace’s performance style—essentially unchanged from Gabel’s, as can be seen in unofficial, fan recorded footage from the band’s recent performances—the camera moves out towards the audience.\(^{117}\)

Generally, these performances highlight Grace’s interaction and relationship with her fans more than she and her band mates’ punk-style stage posturing.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler asserts, “even if the sexes appear to be unproblematically binary in their morphology and constitution (which will become a question), there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two.”\(^{118}\) While I don’t intend to imply that Grace

---

\(^{117}\) For example, as depicted in Against Me!’s performance of “Drinking with the Jocks” at FYF Fest, discussed on pg. 39.

\(^{118}\) Ibid, 10.
occupies a gender that is neither male nor female, her version of a female identity is not entirely “unproblematically binary.” Strongly embodying both male and female characteristics, Grace does not fall in between a gender binary, rather, she occupies both poles at once. Yvon Bonenfant suggests a musical body not restricted to a binary division in his article “Queer Listening to Queer Vocal Timbres.” He states, “the vocalic body is produced not only by the unique genetic capacities of each human (as modified by their environmental and cultural experience—what I will call the social body), but also by exactly what is taking place within that body. In other words, our social body is in a constant state of flux.” According to Bonenfant’s model, Grace’s voice ought not be restricted to a binary paradigm of male or female. In fact, the continuous flux of the social body is well suited to individuals transitioning gender, their own identities continually in flux for a period of time. Being biologically and environmentally influenced, yet allowing for a varying range of possibilities taking place inside of the body (presumably mentally and physically), Bonenfant allows Grace’s voice a spectrum on which to change, without any concern for assignment of binary gender.

The Disembodied Voice

A disjuncture occurs when Laura Jane Grace’s voice is presented independently of her image; such a traditionally gruff, masculine voice would likely not emanate from a feminine face and body. In his text, Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music, Simon Frith discusses listeners’ reactions to the disembodied voice, sound separated from its fleshly point of origin.

---

Frith’s article acknowledges the seemingly inherent need to assign a body—often one that is gendered, racialized, and classed—to these disembodied voices.\textsuperscript{120} In his chapter, “The Voice,” Frith references the hit single, “Oh Bondage! Up Yours!,” released in 1977 by British punk band X-Ray Spex, as a piece intended to challenge conventions of what women-singers biologically do and ideologically should sound like. For Frith, the harsh, screaming female vocals in “Oh Bondage! Up Yours!” incite questioning: “Does a voice have to be embodied? Must it be gendered? Can a singer change sex?”\textsuperscript{121}

In Laura Jane Grace’s case, many listeners might struggle to hear her recorded voice as one embodied by her female form.\textsuperscript{122} In reference to Frith’s questions, the answers remain unclear. While Grace is literally in the process of changing gender, many may struggle in accepting her performance of that change as authentic, hung up particularly on her “masculine” voice. Frith concludes his argument with the following:

The voice, in short, may or may not be a key to someone’s identity, but it is certainly a key to the ways in which we change identities, pretend to be something we’re not, deceive people, lie. We use the voice, that is, not just to assess a person, but also, even more systematically, to assess that person’s sincerity: the voice and how it is used (as well as words and how they are used) become a measure of someone’s truthfulness.\textsuperscript{123}

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid, 195.
\textsuperscript{122} Generally, I would argue that such a grainy, guttural voice is undoubtedly embodied (à la Roland Barthes), yet Grace’s presentation challenges this aural convention.
\textsuperscript{123} Frith, \textit{Performing Rites}. 
While likely not intentionally, Grace’s recorded voice has the power to deceive listeners. However, the singer argues that the fault lies in our socially constructed expectations of gender: “People just need to accept that this too is what a woman sounds like.”

Freya Jarman-Ivens discusses vocal identification in depth in the first chapter of *Queer Voices*. To begin her explanation of vocal identification, she cites Gerry Moorey: “he suggests early on that identification with music is when “the listener is inserted, body and soul, into the very fabric of what they hear,”” a sort of visceral understanding and imaging of the singer. Jarman-Ivens states that vocal identification “serves both to assert the subject’s being and to threaten it simultaneously,” resulting in “a process in which the listening subject is brought into a moment of crisis, and one that can consequently be very queer indeed.” In later chapters, Jarman-Ivens draws on Lacanian philosophy to describe the voice as a site of self-actualization. It is this identification with and against the voice of another that may create an instance of queering. Grace’s trans voice may be heard as biologically male, yet is presented and self-articulated as female, subverting expectations and creating an even more sensitive site for queering, by the ways it subverts expectations. Jarman-Ivens’ auditory “moment of crisis” could be exacerbated by listeners’ discovery that Grace’s disembodied voice may not match the physical body that they anticipate. It is this rupture between the perceived body and actual body that render Laura Jane Grace’s disembodied voice a site for queering. In the pages that follow, I address the specific timbre of Grace’s voice, not in relation to disembodiment or masculine conventions, but through its own history and damage over time. The timbre of Grace’s damaged

---

124 Grace, “Ask Me Anything.”
126 Ibid, 28.
voice helps to facilitate an intimate, empathetic relationship with fans, both through overuse damage, and the singer’s transition, resulting in a unique relationship between the artist and her fans.

**Scream Until You’re Coughing Up Blood**

In her article, “The Organ of the Soul: Voice, Damage, and Affect,” Laurie Stras begins with an anecdote describing her difficulties in finding the best musical home for her voice. Deemed unfit for a career in the world of classical *bel canto* singing (despite her extensive training), Stras began adapting her style for performance in the popular music sphere. After irreparably distressing her voice in an attempt to create a more authentic rock sound, the author found that her damaged voice was not only accepted, but preferred in many popular music genres. She recalls, “My case, and I would hazard also the cases of many other singers engaged in popular music, might suggest that vocal damage has acquired the status of a culturally inscribed desirable mutilation, at least partially analogous to tattooing or body piercings.” Stras’ article concludes that the classical world rejects damaged voices because the *jouissance* of the material voice “subverts the signifying action of the spoken words,” interfering with lexical meaning. In other words, the visceral pleasure of the sound of the damaged voice detracts from listeners’ abilities to garner meaning from text, not from the expression or affect

---

128 Ibid, 173.
129 Ibid, 175.
130 Ibid, 177.
heard in the voice. While certainly this assertion does not apply to every (or even most) lovers of opera or Western art music, Stras raises an interesting point regarding the contrasting auditory preferences between these listeners and those in the popular music sphere. She asserts that “the disrupted voice conveys meaning even before it conveys language, […] indicative of passions, suffering, disease, malfunction, abnormality.”\textsuperscript{131} This bodily/affective communication tends to be more respected by popular music fans (than classical tradition listeners), who “are certain there is more being communicated by the voice than the words it speaks.”\textsuperscript{132}

Harsh and gritty, Laura Jane Grace’s sound undeniably fits Stras’ model for the disrupted voice. Grace’s voice conveys physical damage, self-induced from many years of performances in a screaming singing style, in addition to her aforementioned “years of smoking cigarettes and drinking whiskey.” Although Grace hasn’t employed her trademark screaming style in every Against Me! track, it can be heard on every album in the band’s output. This style best conveys the damaged affect of Grace’s voice.

“Scream Until You’re Coughing Up Blood,” from the band’s 2002 album Against Me! Is Reinventing Axl Rose is sung entirely with Grace’s (then Gabel’s) scream.\textsuperscript{133} Gabel emphasizes the first and third beats of each four-beat measure, accenting these syllables with a loud attack at a higher pitch.

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid, 173.
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid, 173.
\textsuperscript{133} Against Me!, Against Me! Is Reinventing Axl Rose.
Figure 1.1 Syllabic Emphasis in “Scream Until You’re Coughing Up Blood”

These notes exhibit the sound of great strain, as Gabel nearly loses control reaching for the higher pitches. The higher Gabel’s scream reaches, the less discernable the lyrics become as he loses control of his ability to shape syllables. “Scream Until You’re Coughing Up Blood” reaches its climax at the beginning of the second and final verse. Gabel shouts:

   Everything, you thought that it would be.
   Everything, you thought you were living for,
   Is completely fucked.\textsuperscript{134}

Momentum builds as Gabel places his accented scream with equal emphasis on all four beats of the continuing measures. On the final syllable of the following line, “This is no place to be,” Gabel sustains his scream for eight beats (the longest duration of any pitch in the song), consistently crescendoing, glissandoing up, and building intensity until the scream goes from controlled pitch, to an entirely wild and unbridled expression of angst. The pain in Gabel’s voice

\textsuperscript{134} Against Me!, “Scream Until You’re Coughing Up Blood,” on Against Me! Is Reinventing Axl Rose, No Idea Records, 2002, CD.
practically tangible at this moment—the relatable experience of screaming “until you’re coughing up blood.”

Stras asserts that in some cases, a damaged singing voice can help to facilitate “empathy and identification between performer and listener,” bridging the gap between singer and audience to create a closer relationship. Laura Jane Grace’s voice, damaged through practice, and disrupted in transition, facilitates an empathetic relationship between the performer and her fans, both through the jouissance of vocal affect, as well as the lived experience of her gender transition. Stras suggests that the sounds of trauma conveyed by the disrupted voice communicate to listeners at sublinguistic levels, beyond the lexical meaning of the song text. While Grace’s lyrics (especially in Transgender Dysphoria Blues) do represent the singer’s identity struggles, her voice, as it relates to her appearance, communicates to fans about her transition in more intimate ways. As an example, Stras describes the way in which listeners can relate empathetically to a singer with a hoarse voice, often able to recall similar personal experience. Much in this same way, Grace’s genderqueer fans are able to empathize with her experience of not “passing,” or occupying a non-binary gender space. Stras states:

[...] Through bypassing linguistic signification and opening up the channels of affect, vocal disruption can bring the artist and the performance over the acceptable boundaries that distance them from the listener. This transgression can precipitate catharsis and even healing for the traumatized, who may resonate bodily with the raw feelings discerned in the singers damaged voice. 

---

135 Stras, “The Organ of the Soul,” 175.
136 Ibid, 176.
137 Ibid, 178.
A common trope in punk music fandom is the societal outcast or underdog, seeking community and connection through this scene. Grace’s disrupted voice transgresses the “acceptable boundaries” between singer and listeners, reaching out to fans searching for a connection—her open, public transition allows her to be an ally for genderqueer listeners, potentially acting as a healer.

In “The Organ of the Soul,” Stras explores the careers of vocalists Bing Crosby, Ethel Waters, and Connie Boswell, all of whom experienced some form of vocal damage or trauma. She states, “Crosby [...] may well have been able to carry the damage more easily as a male singer; as in the many other ways in which the female body can voluntarily, if violently be denaturalized. Waters and Boswell may have felt under more pressure to have corrective surgery in order to conform to—or to return to—a more acceptably female, unpathologized sound.”

Grace’s vocal damage was well received as a male vocalist, yet although this voice has remained consistent, its perception has changed in relation to Grace’s now female body. Although somewhat protected by the expectations of punk music (a style that rarely features pure, ringing voices), Grace’s transition has left some to expect a change to the “unpathologized” voice suggested by Stras. By rejecting these expectations, Grace queers aural perception in addition to adhering to the countercultural punk attitude, both making a statement regarding the unchanged timbre of her voice and maintaining the long-term integrity of Against Me!’s sound.

---

138 Ibid, 180.
Conclusion

Laura Jane Grace’s feminine presentation, attire, and identification considered in conjunction with her unchanged voice, frequently understood as masculine presents a paradox to mainstream culture. In her assertion that, “this too is what a woman sounds like,” Grace challenges heteronormative standards of gender identities by transgressing the boundaries of expectations. While all three musicians discussed in this thesis have used music as an outlet to discuss, portray, and engage with transgender experience, both Our Lady J and Lucas Silveira have chosen to manipulate or change their voices. Grace, however, deconstructs the performative nature of gender through her choice to not change the sound or range of her voice.

Grace selectively employs certain traits of masculine performance behaviors associated with rock genres, while refuting other conventional expectations about her gender. Although Grace exhibits many stereotypically male characteristics in performance, her identification as female intercepts the possibility of her acceptance as a girl into a boys’ club. While Grace’s voice presented to listeners in isolation from images of her body may deceive listeners, a reunion of the sound and image queer listeners’ identification with and against the disrupted voice and appearance.

Laura Jane Grace the singer may seem paradoxical in mainstream contemporary American culture, but she stands for something much greater than herself—Grace’s contribution to the transgender/gender queer rights movement has been indispensable. Grace has raised awareness by opening up her transitional journey to the public, providing mainstream America with a glimpse at a world they might be otherwise entirely unfamiliar with. Perhaps most
significant is Grace’s desire for trans individuals to lead normal, respected lives, not as spectacles or others, but as humans. In Episode 7 of *True Trans*, Grace concludes, “for me, I don’t want it to be the only thing about me as an artist, I don’t want it to always be like, transgender performer, transgender singer, I just want to be a singer … you know? I just want to be in a band.”

---

139 Laura Jane Grace, *True Trans*. 
“I’M YOUR MAN”:
CONSTRUCTING LUCAS SILVEIRA’S GENDER IDENTITY
THROUGH QUEERING AND COVER SONG

“Every time people ask me, ‘When did you come out?’ I always ask them, ‘which time?’”

Lucas Silveira, lead singer of Canadian rock band, The Cliks, is widely recognized as the first transgender musician to have recorded on a major label. After coming out as a transman in the early 2000s, Silveira went many years before beginning hormone replacement therapy for fear of the negative effects testosterone might have on his voice. During these years, Silveira proudly occupied a liminal gender space, refuting a traditional male/female binary. Since beginning hormone replacement therapy in early 2010, the singer has tracked his vocal change through a series of cover song recordings uploaded to his public YouTube account. Across the timeline of these videos, both Silveira’s voice and self-presentation have changed, reflecting his coming out as a new man.

This chapter looks at the variety of ways in which Lucas Silveira constructs his gender identity through music. Drawing upon the theoretical work of Judith Butler, Judith Halberstam, and Annette Schlichter, I analyze the ways in which Silveira’s gender construction rejects categorization, while also exploring how Silveira depicts his own gender identity through vocal

production techniques and his public persona. My work dialogues with that of performance theorist Elias Krell, who has written about cover songs as spaces where trans artists can grow and shift identities. Looking closely at Silveira’s YouTube uploads and the fan community centered around these pages, I compare and contrast reactions to specific recordings. By juxtaposing two Justin Timberlake songs with Lucas Silveira’s renditions, I discuss each artist’s performance choices, considering Silveira’s differing identity perspectives before and after his experiences with hormone replacement therapy. This chapter examines Lucas Silveira’s construction of his spectrum of gender identities across the course of his musical career—from The Cliks, to covers, to new original work—with his changing voice and the context in which it is understood as a central discussion.

In Transition

The timeline of Lucas Silveira’s coming out as transgender and his steps towards transition prove difficult to nail down with precision. Silveira has discussed various parts of his transition process in many different interviews and publications, yet there is not a singular source that documents his transition in its entirety. Because of this, a compilation of Silveira’s accounts of individual steps and phases of identification must be brought together in order to create a clearer picture of the singer’s perception and presentation.

Performance theorist Elias Krell has extensively interviewed Silveira and has written on the singer’s voice and identity as a trans/gender nonconforming artist. In his essay, “Contours through Covers: Voice and Affect in the Music of Lucas Silveira,” Krell explains that Silveira
came out as transgender to family and friends near the release of The Cliks’ first, self-titled album. Another source, however, offers conflicting information, claiming that Silveira was still identifying as female at this time. Prior to the release of The Cliks’ second album *Snakehouse* in 2007, Silveira told local news source, the *Toronto Star*, that "[transition] happened before [Snakehouse] came out and I decided: ‘You know what? It’s who I am, take it or leave it.’ I’m not gonna sit around and tell people something that I’m not.”

Despite not having begun hormone replacement therapy, Silveira noted a change in the pitch and timbre of his voice during the early years of his transition:

I don’t know if I was subconsciously doing it, but I noticed that my voice deepened. I don’t know if it [happened] naturally, I don’t know if it was because of touring, I don’t know what it was. But I even listen to the first album, like from The Cliks’s first album, to the second album to the third album, my voice totally changed [...] the way I looked changed. Like, my face changed.

Here, Silveira hints at a transition at a seemingly psychological level, a shift in his own perception and outward projection of identity. While the artist was not on testosterone, he began to notice masculine characteristics produced internally and subconsciously.

---

144 Krell, “Contours through Covers,” 480.
In an August 2007 interview for the program *Morning Edition* with National Public Radio’s Renee Montagne, Silveira acknowledged his “no-ho” (non hormone) status, stemming from his fears of vocal damage or loss. Silveira tells Montagne, “I just decided that that was not something that I could do because, I identify as transgender, but I identify mainly as a musician and as a singer.” Here, Silveira highlights his musical identity as being of greater concern to him than a binary gender label, thus refuting expectations for performed gender and traditional roles. In the same interview, Silveira describes his concern for being perceived as female, and his subsequent acceptance of not “passing” as male, asserting, “I will sit in the middle, and I’m very comfortable where I am right now.”\(^{145}\) This movement toward an ambiguous gender defined Silveira’s identity as one which was both fluid and multifaceted, linked with—yet not determinant of—his musical identity.

My intention in clarifying Silveira’s transition process is in the interest of depicting how the artist’s gender identity and decisions regarding hormonal transition aid in the understanding of the identities experienced throughout his musical output. The following section discusses the relationship of Silveira’s liminal identity to the hazy border between transmale and butch lesbian communities, investigating his relationships to such carefully defined groups.

**I’m Not Your Boy**

During Silveira’s radio interview with Renee Montagne, the singer described his then-recent contemplations regarding his own gender identity.

\(^{145}\) Ibid.
My reasoning for resenting the fact that I couldn’t take [testosterone] is that I was like, everybody’s always saying ‘she’. I always get pulled up into this reality, and I feel that I’m not visibly trans. And [my trans friend] said to me, ‘Well I find that interesting because my choice not to go on testosterone has nothing to do with my voice but it has to do with the fact that I feel that I would be invisible being trans, and that I would be walking around the world with everybody thinking that I was a “biological” male.’ And I started thinking about that, and I started thinking about how much more comfortable I am with people knowing that I’m transgender and not necessarily what we call ‘passing.’ So I will sit in the middle, and I’m very comfortable where I am right now.\(^\text{146}\)

Here, Silveira not only directly asserts his desire to occupy an intentionally ambiguous gender space, refuting a male/female binary, he also acknowledges a new found openness and pride in this identity.

The Cliks have never self-defined as a lesbian band, yet they are often associated with queer culture. Articles reviewing Cliks albums, interviewing band members, and discussing Silveira’s transition can be found on a variety of lesbian community websites.\(^\text{147}\) The association of The Cliks with lesbian culture, Silveira’s gender nonconforming status, and his later physiological transition to self-classified male raise questions about Silveira’s identification in relation to the lesbian communities The Cliks have been linked with.


\(^{147}\) Some examples being: lesbiannews.com, allthingslesbeau.blogspot.com, lgbtweekly.com, lesbian.com, pleasebutch.tumblr.com, autostraddle.com, facebook.com/butch.voices.9, and many more.
Judith Halberstam’s chapter, “Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum” from her book, *Female Masculinity*, explores distinctions and issues between butch lesbian and female-to-male trans communities in addition to identifying commonalities shared between the two. In reference to her chapter’s title, Halberstam states, “On the one hand, the idea of a border war sets up some notion of territories to be defended, ground to be held or lost, permeability to be defended against. On the other hand, a border war suggests that the border is at best slippery and permeable.” Lucas Silveira has straddled this permeable boundary for many years, acting as a figurehead for and successfully contributing to both butch lesbian and FTM transgender communities.

In early scholarly discussions of transgenderism, liminal or ambiguous gender spaces were largely disregarded. Individuals feeling trapped by “the wrong body,” it was presumed, desired a switch from one pole of the gender binary to the other. Sandy Stone’s crucial work, “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” known as a catalyst for transgender scholarship, recalls early studies and writings on transgenderism which rely on this polarity. Stone writes, “Besides the obvious complicity of these accounts in a Western white male definition of performative gender, the authors also reinforce a binary, oppositional mode of gender identification. They go from being unambiguous men, albeit unhappy men, to unambiguous women. There is no territory between.” Later she adds, “If there is any

---

149 Ibid, 163.
151 Ibid, 5.
A look at today’s works in the field prove great advances in transgender studies. In “Transgender Butch,” Halberstam not only identifies both absolute and fluid gender spaces, she discusses a merging of the two: a continuum with permeable boundaries. Halberstam states:

So while it is true that transgender and transsexual men have been wrongly folded into lesbian history, it is also true that the distinctions between some transsexual identities and some lesbian identities may at times become quite blurry. Many FTMs do come out as lesbians before they come out as transsexuals (many, it must also be said, do not). And for this reason alone, one cannot always maintain hard and fast definitive distinctions between lesbians and transsexuals [...] Many transgender men, quite possibly, successfully identify as butch in a queer female community before they decide to transition. Once they have transitioned, many transsexual men want to maintain their ties to their queer lesbian communities.

Silveira’s masculine appearance and mannerisms of the early Cliks years could easily have been read as signifiers of butchness in conjunction with the band’s associations with lesbian culture. His interview with Montagne marked his turning point towards an intentionally gender-ambiguous space, aligning with Halberstam’s “blurry” distinctions. Since the beginning of Silveira’s HRT transition, the artist has not made any public statements reinforcing a connection to the butch community, yet the community’s continued interest and internet presence surrounding The Cliks and Silveira points to an ongoing connection.

---

152 Ibid, 7.
153 Halberstam, Female Masculinity, 150.
According to Halberstam, the self-presentation of butch lesbians is often read as “temporary or theatrical” masculinity. Halberstam notes that this can be seen as problematic “when it becomes too ‘real,’ or when some imaginary line has been crossed between play and seriousness.”\textsuperscript{154} To reconcile these boundaries of performed maleness and lived maleness, Halberstam suggests the idioms of the “stone butch,”\textsuperscript{155} and the “transgender butch.”\textsuperscript{156} The stone butch may move in and out of gender comfort, experiencing “an unstable sense of identification with lesbianism or femaleness.”\textsuperscript{157} Halberstam’s transgender butch continues to identify as female, yet presents with masculine embodiment, leaning closer on the spectrum to transmen than butch lesbians.\textsuperscript{158}

Attempting to label Lucas Silveira as once a stone or transgender butch proves to be of little use. While it may be interesting to evaluate Silveira’s stages of masculine presentation along Halberstam’s gender continuum, it is important to recall Silveira’s desires for ambiguity—the opposite of categorization. Stone states, “In the transsexual as text we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries.”\textsuperscript{159} The multiple framings of Silveira’s gender presentation throughout the history of The Cliks presents these “unexpected geometries” of gender across a spectrum of change. No matter which way the signifiers are read,

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid, 151.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid, 111-140.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid, 146.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid, 152.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid, 146.
\textsuperscript{159} Stone, “A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” 12.
the mid-career Cliks’ Lucas Silveira\textsuperscript{160} can be understood as successfully ambiguous—“in the middle”\textsuperscript{161}—as intended.

\textbf{(Trans)Gender Trouble}

In her landmark work on gender performativity, \textit{Gender Trouble}, Judith Butler states, “Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders.”\textsuperscript{162} Such a discontinuity has existed between Silveira’s personal identity and his publicly perceived body—a discontinuity emphasized largely by his pre-testosterone voice. In the following pages, I explore Butler’s work on gender identity and performativity, as well as a specific critique on Butler’s neglect of vocal considerations offered by Annette Schlichter, both in relation to Lucas Silveira’s construction of gender identity.

Butler opens up a space for non-binary gender identities stating, “there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two,”\textsuperscript{163} yet she continues on to note that gender, a “free-floating artifice,” can manifest as \textit{man} and \textit{masculine} mapped onto a biologically female body or \textit{woman} and \textit{feminine} can be mapped onto a biologically male body.\textsuperscript{164} I question whether Butler might view the masculinity of a transman as an identity mapped onto (and therefore still linked inextricably with) a biologically female body—a problematic assertion for male-identified

\begin{footnotes}
\item[160] Roughly 2004-2009, post out-as-trans, pre hormone replacement therapy.
\item[161] Lucas Silveira, ”Cliks Lead Singer Silveira: Welcoming Change,” Interview by Renee Montagne.
\item[163] Ibid, 10.
\item[164] Ibid, 10.
\end{footnotes}
trans individuals. Silveira cites a dysphoric relationship with his biologically female body as the major catalyst for his eventual use of testosterone. To insist on an inescapable connection to the wrongly-sexed body stands in opposition to Silveira’s assertion of ambiguity.

Later in the same chapter, Butler addresses liminal gender identities, stating, “The cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of ‘identities’ cannot ‘exist’—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender.” By and large, this serves as an accurate assessment of Western culture’s adherence to a gender/sex binary for centuries. However, considering Gender Trouble’s original publication date of nearly twenty-five years ago, I argue that the cultural matrix of gender identity has become (at least somewhat) more malleable, with increasing numbers of individuals who publicly identify and present as gender nonconforming.

In her 2011 book, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,” Butler continues, “[...] the sexed integrity of the body is paradoxically achieved through an identification with its reduction into idealized synecdoche (“having” or “being” the phallus). The body that fails to submit to the law or occupies that law in a mode contrary to its dictate thus loses its sure footing—its cultural gravity—in the symbolic and reappears in its imaginary tenuousness, its fictional direction. Such bodies contest the norms that govern the intelligibility of sex.” While I agree with Butler that these governing “norms” result in the limitation of non-binary-conforming identities, I would argue that transgender musicians are helping a

---

165 Krell, “Contours through Covers,” 484.
166 Ibid, 24.
marginalized community to, in fact, gain sure footing. Artists such as Silveira use their public presence to create a new symbol, one refuting a binary gender view, establishing a greater cultural gravity through increased visibility and public awareness. Because Silveira has identified as a musician first (as opposed to a transman), he rejects the need for gender categorization.

Annette Schlichter raises issues with Butler’s analyses of gender performativity in her article, “Do Voices Matter? Vocality, Materiality, and Gender Performance.” Schlichter argues that Butler fails to properly consider issues of voice in her analyses of gender performativity. She states, “[Butler’s] theory of gender performativity and the consecutive deliberations about the matter of bodies do not account for voice as sound, nor do they acknowledge the mediation of vocal acts through sound technologies.” When discussing a transgender singer’s construction of gender identity, considerations of vocal presentation are imperative. In fact, Silveira’s journey from biologically assigned voice to post-testosterone voice has been formative of his public identity, both musically and culturally. Addressed later in further detail (see page 73), Silveira’s two renditions of Roy Orbison’s “Crying” bookend his transition, chronicling the singer’s voice before and after hormone replacement therapy. According to Schlichter, Butler dwells on the visual, “while excluding the voice as one of the relevant aspects of ‘significant corporeality.’” This omission makes a discussion of identity as constructed through appearance and vocality impossible.

In “Do Voices Matter?,” Schlichter cites John Durham Peters, noting, “voice can be understood as a culturally framed physical accomplishment rather than as a biologically fixed

---

169 Ibid, 33.
expression of gender.”\footnote{Ibid, 43.} Schlichter asserts that aural perception is not inextricably tied to imagery. She states, “Studies on the perception of the voice, or the listening position, support [...] a denaturalization of vocal sexual differences. Thus, performance scholar and teacher Pamela Hendricks argues that vocalization in itself does not provide enough information to the listener to communicate gender: ‘Only when voice and gesture are combined and repeated in more detailed patterns do they result in an impression of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine.’”\footnote{Ibid, 44.} By this logic, Lucas Silveira’s voice alone may not be substantive enough to read as a qualifier of gender. However, perceiving Silveira’s voice as it originates from its bodily source allows a combination with visual signs through which identity can be more clearly articulated.

Schlichter argues that in Butler’s minimal discussions of vocality (limited mainly to speech), Butler’s interest lies primarily in the “physical process,” remaining “firmly situated on the product of the process, which is the meaning produced by the discourse.”\footnote{Ibid, 42.} Lucas Silveira’s pre-testosterone voice—perceived by some as female, produced by Silveira as male—reads as a product misaligned with the producer’s intentions. While the product of the speech process exists as one element in construction of transgender identity, the process and intentions of the one vocalizing are integral considerations in a larger picture understanding of an individual’s identity.

In Gender Trouble, Judith Butler writes, “If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance,
but sex and gender, and gender and performance.”

If this paradigm is applied to Lucas Silveira’s pre-testosterone, male-identified period, his performances could be described as: anatomically female, male gendered, and performatively ambiguous, resulting in dissonance between all categories. While Butler may problematize this disjuncture, it is, as I see it, what has helped trans artists call attention to trans issues in a public forum. As opposed to aiming for perceptual consonance between performance and gender, thus reinforcing binary expectations, trans and genderqueer artists have used their liminal identities to create awareness and to celebrate nonconforming gender identities.

At the conclusion of “Do Voices Matter?,” Annette Schlichter writes, “The sonic can work against a coherently gendered, intelligible body. We can now listen to the voice as a voluntary or involuntary material site of the disruption of the repetitive acts that produce normative subjects. Because of its potential to be disciplined by and to disrupt meaning, the voice can even become a site where gender is naturalized and denaturalized at the same time.”

While Butler may marginalize an in-depth study of vocality as a part of gender identity and performativity, her work offers immeasurable insight on construction of identities to which transgender vocalists can be compared and juxtaposed. Annette Schlichter’s contributions to the study of voice and gender construction help to fill in where Butler leaves off, creating a source from which the identities of transgender vocalists can be explored and given meaning.

---

173 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 175.
174 Schlichter, “Do Voices Matter?,” 47.
“cliksmusic”: Silveira’s E-Transition

Out of the sixty-three video uploads on Lucas Silveira’s YouTube page, “cliksmusic,” twenty-six are solo cover songs. These covers range in style and reach across eras, spanning from Elvis Presley and Roy Orbison to Madonna, as far as Beyoncé and Rihanna. All of Silveira’s cover song videos appear to be recorded using his computer’s web camera, as opposed to a studio quality system. While the audio-visual production of these videos is far from high quality, the viewer is encouraged to focus on the musical content. Silveira films himself alone, framed closely in the shot, allowing for little distraction from the singer’s voice and guitar playing. Some of Silveira’s videos are dark and at times blurry enough that the visual seems nearly inconsequential. Silveira’s fans have formed an online community in the comment sections of these regularly uploaded videos, creating a safe space for fans and other trans-individuals to discuss Silveira’s music, voice, and transition following each video.

The first cover song published to cliksmusic was George Michael’s “Freedom,” uploaded September 22, 2009. Silveira sings “Freedom” with an unfettered naturalness, evoking the sound of the rich, low alto tone of k.d. lang. Alternating between slightly nasal passages sung at a softer dynamic, and much fuller, open throated singing, Silveira’s tone is clear and powerful. Recalling the timeline of Silveira’s transition, the singer had been identifying as transgender for quite some time, yet had not begun testosterone. A number of posts in the comments section prove fans’ particular attachment to the distinct timbre of Silveira’s voice.

---

ladykizzra: “I love his voice...is so wonderful and absolutely amazing”

GinSL: “Really, really great. Gave me goosebumps. I love your voice.”

Compliments like those quoted above can be found following every Silveira cover video. In these early uploads, some users express their confusion over Silveira’s gender presentation, while others jump at the chance to defend Silveira or engage in dialogue. In the comment section of Silveira’s October 2009 cover of “Poker Face,” originally by Lady Gaga, user Yellokitti63 posts, “She sounds a lot like Melissa Etheridge.” In response, user Dave Whoru writes, “who??? she??? i can't see a woman there…”

Subtle changes from testosterone first become noticeable in Silveira’s voice in his rendition of Beyoncé’s “Halo,” uploaded on January 20, 2010. Silveira begins the song’s first line delicately, singing:

Remember those walls I built?
Baby they’re tumbling down.
They didn’t even put up a fight,
Didn’t even make a sound.

180 Yellokitti63, comment on Lucas Silveira, “Poker Face- Lady Gaga covered by Lucas Silveira of the Cliks.”
181 Dave Whoru, comment on Lucas Silveira, “Poker Face- Lady Gaga covered by Lucas Silveira of the Cliks.”
Silveira tapers off to whisper the final word. The low dynamic reveals the singer’s new ability to produce a nasal tone in a lower pitch register. Gradually crescendoing, Silveira switches to his full chest voice during the song’s chorus, sounding even more robust and impassioned than in “Freedom.”

In the video’s comments section, fans begin to acknowledge the change in Silveira’s voice in an increasingly direct manner. For instance, user sTapleEVA writes, “My favorite videos of you are the ones where [you’re] in between the two genders. (voice wise, i think it was most beautiful at that point).” After the release of “Halo,” a hiatus occurred in Silveira’s regular YouTube uploads. The next video to appear on the artist’s account was his version of Robyn’s “Dancing On My Own,” uploaded in September 2010. In a comment posted to this video, user shaun4000uk informs user sapphicspencil, “Hes been on T for a year now. The difference is pretty big from last September.”

When heard in succession with “Halo,” the change in Silveira’s sound in “Dancing On My Own” is undeniable–his voice has a deeper quality and sounds less strained in his low register. While Silveira does not typically alter the lyrics in his cover recordings, he changes Robyn’s original “I’m giving it my all, but I’m not the girl you’re taking home,” to “I’m giving it my all, but I’m not the guy you’re taking home.” Silveira’s gender presentation in “Dancing On My Own” reestablishes his online presence post-hiatus as a more masculinized man.

---

183 sTapleEVA, comment on Lucas Silveira, “Halo- Beyonce Cover.”
185 shaun4000uk, comment on Lucas Silveira, “Robyn - Dancing On My Own- Covered by Lucas Silveira of The Cliks.”
For the remainder of 2010, Silveira continued to upload cover songs featuring his new voice at a steady pace. Many fans reacted positively to the change in the comments sections. Following “Dancing On My Own,” user Monfr writes, “You still have an amazing voice, Lucas, even if you can't hit the high notes anymore. You're still my favourite musician and vocalist.”

Silveira’s next cover, Jeff Buckley’s “Last Goodbye,” uploaded a short five days after “Dancing On My Own,” also received a warm response. User daniii3 posts “your voice sounds amazing, better even.”

Fans have not only responded to Silveira’s transition by discussing the singer’s voice, some have connected personally with his journey of public, outward change. In Silveira’s October 2010 upload of Leonard Cohen’s “I’m Your Man,” user HaydenShyBoi comments:

love you lucas! your music is always sooo soothing. love that your not on T [by the way],
i cant do it yet and some [people] think that makes me less of a guy since i cant even get that, but look at you. your amazing man. beautiful voice, beautiful song.

Lucas Silveira, himself, then takes the time to respond directly to HaydenShyBoi, stating:

---

186 Monfr, comment on Lucas Silveira, “Robyn - Dancing On My Own- Covered by Lucas Silveira of The Cliks.”
188 daniii3, comment on Lucas Silveira, “Last Goodbye Jeff Buckley.”
190 The song choice being, perhaps, another reinforcement of masculinity and agency.
I am on T buddy. 1 year. And see? I can still sing! BUT you are as much of man as any
man out there. And what does that mean anyway? Do what feels good for you and your
path. My path took me to starting T and I'm very happy. BUT that doesn't mean it's
what's right for you. Don't let anything anyone tells you about being a "man" get into
your head. It's all bullshit. Be well friend.192

This is the only instance in which Silveira responds personally to any YouTube comment, taking
a moment to explain his current gender identity and transformation as well as acknowledging,
engaging with, and supporting his fan community created in YouTube’s context.

Not all fans responded positively to the drastic change in Silveira’s voice. In the
comments section of Silveira’s cover of “Apologize,” originally by Timbaland,193 user
octogirlpretty writes, “I don't like it. I can't lie and I know Lucas doesn't expect everyone to
receive his new vocals well. At this point those of us who aren't digging this so much will either
have to listen to the first 3 albums and drop anything else that comes along, or get over it. This is
too painful for me though, so I guess I just need to give it time.”194 Octogirlpretty’s pained
sentiments of loss mark a turning point in Silveira’s transformation on testosterone: by this point
at the end of 2010, his voice had changed greatly enough for his pre-testosterone voice to be
considered lost—something, according to octogirlpretty’s post, mournable. Silveira’s rendition of
“Apologize” alternates between a low, resonant chest voice, and his higher, falsetto range. In

192 cliksmusic, comment on Lucas Silveira, “I’m Your Man- Leonard Cohen cover by Lucas
Silveira of The Cliks.”
193 Lucas Silveira, “Apologize- Timbaland ft One Republic covered by Lucas Silveira of The
194 octogirlpretty, comment on Lucas Silveira, “Apologize- Timbaland ft One Republic covered
by Lucas Silveira of The Cliks.”
“Freedom,” Silveira glides easily between extreme registers, his voice pure and ringing in both
high and low pitch ranges. In “Apologize,” however, Silveira’s high range head voice is
noticeably different, no longer pure, but somewhat strained and timbrally disjointed from the
sound quality of his lower, chest voice register.

Lucas Silveira recorded two separate renditions of the same song only once on YouTube:
Roy Orbison’s “Crying.” Silveira’s first cover of “Crying” was released on December 31,
2009. At the time, there were no obvious auditory indicators of whether or not Silveira had
begun hormone replacement therapy. A few years later, Silveira uploaded a new cover of
“Crying” on February 1, 2012. His caption for the video reads:

I did this song way back when my voice was different. I thought I'd lost it for a while and
would never be able to sing it again. Apparently, I was wrong! With a lot of work and
dedication, I've brought my vocals back full tilt. Compare. It's a doozy!

A back-to-back listening of these two performances of “Crying” depict Silveira’s vocal
transformation from beginning to end, resulting in a lower register and altered timbre. In the first
version of “Crying,” Silveira uses a wide mouth, a great amount of air, and loud volume to
produce a low register, pressed forward from the back of the throat. Scooping down to his lowest
pitches, Silveira maintains a consistently rich, clear tone as he glides effortlessly between
registers. The second time around, Silveira’s low range comes more naturally. His lower pitches

---

196 Lucas Silveira, “Crying- Roy Orbison cover,” YouTube video, 3:52, posted by “clicksmusic,”
have a just barely audible scratchiness, digging in like tiny burrs. The reactions of Silveira’s online fan community to this second cover read overwhelmingly positive:

returnonetime: “Your voice has changed but its like adding another layer and depth. Going on T has almost made me scared of testing and pushing my voice (not that I am a singer, just in a general sense). [K]udos for going for it and finding something so powerful.”

enkelien: “I'm really glad you were able to make T work for you -- personally I like the change in your voice. I noticed it in my own when I started hormones, that deeper resonance, and it startled me every time I opened my mouth until I got used to it.”

These two performances of “Crying,” bookend Silveira’s hormone replacement therapy journey, providing listeners with “before” and “after” landmarks for a visible/audible spectrum of change depicted across the recordings uploaded in between the “Crying” videos. In the following section, I will analyze in closer detail two Lucas Silveira cover songs to further analyze his sonic construction of gender identity.

Is he everything you wanted in a man?

In his essay, “The Determining Role of Performance in the Articulation of Meaning: The Case of ‘Try a Little Tenderness,’” Rob Bowman compares four different recordings of “Try a Little Tenderness” performed by four different artists. Bowman analyzes sonic qualities of

---

197 returnonetime, comment on Lucas Silveira, “Crying- Roy Orbison cover.”
198 enkelien, comment on Lucas Silveira, “Crying- Roy Orbison cover.”
melody, instrumentation, rhythm, textual interpretation, and vocal timbre, in addition to engaging with each artist’s role within their own musical communities and times. To explain the benefits of both musical and cultural analysis of these multiple renditions, Bowman states, “Ultimately, such exploration forces one [...] to question how and in what parameters musical meaning is articulated.”

In the following section, I will compare two of Lucas Silveira’s Justin Timberlake cover songs, considering both audible musical differences and variance of context and interpretation.

Twice over the course of his career, Lucas Silveira has recorded renditions of songs from Justin Timberlake’s solo albums. The first of the two, “Cry Me a River,” from Timberlake’s 2002 Justified album, appeared on The Cliks’ Snakehouse, released in 2007. The second, Silveira’s solo rendition of “What Goes Around… Comes Around,” from Timberlake’s FutureSex/LoveSounds (2006), was uploaded to YouTube in August 2011. Silveira’s choice to cover these particular Justin Timberlake songs raises many interesting considerations regarding his articulations of gender. Silveira’s choices to utilize similar and contrasting musical inflections in his covers can be juxtaposed with Timberlake’s originals to uncover sites for queering or, conversely, the production of heteronormative masculine images.

It is no secret that Justin Timberlake’s musical style has been long thought of as cultural appropriation; a white, former boy-band member imitating the likes of Michael Jackson and

---

200 Ibid, 103.
201 Justin Timberlake, Justified, Jive Records, 2002, CD.
202 The Cliks, Snakehouse, Silver Label and Tommy Boy Entertainment, 2007, CD.
204 Timberlake, Justified.
Stevie Wonder. Stan Hawkins has written extensively on Timberlake’s style, analyzing the queering that can result from a white male musician’s prominent use of falsetto and high-register singing. In his article, “On Male Queering in Mainstream Pop,” Hawkins writes, “the prototype white boy next door who appropriates black culture, Timberlake is sophisticated and cunning. While any intention of appearing queer is probably inadvertent, he certainly comes across this way. Indeed, his musicality feeds off a sense of queerness that is artificial and contrived at the same time it is fun.”

Elias Krell examines Timberlake’s and Silveira’s recordings of “Cry Me A River,” by exploring socio-political context for the appropriation of black singing styles. Krell states, “We can situate Timberlake’s performance of Black masculinity in a classed and raced medium, in which his white skin and multimillion dollar bankroll grant him ‘cultural cache’ for a performance of Blackness that does not work in reverse.” While Krell acknowledges Silveira’s inherent white privilege, he argues that Silveira’s performance ought to be read through a different lens than Timberlake’s, in consideration of Silveira’s “working class, Portuguese-Canadian, immigrant, and transgender body.” While Timberlake’s appropriation of black style may be used for its cultural capital, I would argue that in his Timberlake covers, Silveira does not attempt to recreate a black style, rather, he engages more with Timberlake’s instances of queerness, affirming or refuting them through his own performances.

According to Hawkins, Timberlake’s vocal range spans approximately two and a half octaves (from B2 up to F5), a range he describes as *hautecontre*, similar to those of countertenors

---

206 Krell, “Contours through Covers,” 482.
207 Ibid, 482.
and castrati. Although Wayne Kostenbaum’s book, The Queen’s Throat, discusses falsetto from a traditionally white, Western art music viewpoint, his commentary on the queer potential of falsetto can be read in relation to Timberlake’s use of the technique. Kostenbaum describes falsetto as a style that transgresses boundaries of reality, stating, “Consistent falsetto, like expert drag, can give the illusion of truth.” It is this bending of authenticity that manifests as queering in Timberlake’s music, and enhances Lucas Silveira’s construction of gender identity in his Justin Timberlake cover songs.

“Cry Me A River”

*Justified*, Justin Timberlake’s first solo album released in 2002, set him apart from his earlier days as teen star of the sugary-sweet boy-band, N*SYNC, by solidifying his personal musical style. Stan Hawkins’ article, “[Un]Justified: Gestures of Straight-Talk in Justin Timberlake’s Songs,” extensively analyzes the music of Timberlake’s early solo career. Hawkins points out that the tracks on *Justified* mostly contain similar lyrical content. The songs are typically first-person narratives that reinforce heteronormativity: “They engage directly with the internal world of the young male and his relationship to women. Adhering to conventional gender norms, J.T.’s songs are about competition, achievement, control, and emotional

---


209 Ibid, 165.
restraint.” While Timberlake’s lyrics may emphasize gender conventionality, his vocal performance on *Justified* sometimes reinforces these roles, yet at times, is strongly transgressive of them.

The following tables outline the various singing styles presented by Timberlake and Silveira in their versions of “Cry Me A River” (see Figures 2.1 and 2.2). The styles correspond with different structural areas of the song, which reflect change through restraint, increase in emotionality, and lyrical embellishment of text.

Mastered by the prolific hip-hop and popular music producers Timbaland and Pharrell Williams, *Justified* was produced with great attention to detail. “Cry Me A River” contains multiple musical layers: Timberlake’s own multi-tracked voice in varying octaves and harmonies, two additional unidentified male voices, instruments, and electronic sounds and effects. The song begins with the mysterious chant-like singing of an unknown male vocalist, overlapping the track’s main instrumental motive. Timberlake enters, singing the first verse in his chest voice with a relatively narrow melodic range. He uses little melisma or embellishment and sings with subtle, restrained dynamic contrast. Hawkins describes this style of singing, “highly punctuated [...] delivered in a slick, quirky, and camped-up manner,” as a type of musical queerness, “modeled on African American artists, such as Michael Jackson, Little Richard, and Prince.”

---

211 The chant-like singer in the song’s introduction and the rapper in the final verse.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Verses**     | “You were my sun, you were my earth…”  
|                | “You know that they say…”  
|                | Sung nearly entirely in chest voice, but is given quite a bit of air, resulting in a non-powerful fundamental frequency range voice. Reserved style: ends of phrases clipped, narrow pitch range, sparing use of vibrato and melisma. |
| **Pre-Choruses** | “You don’t have to say, what you did…”  
|                | Timberlake’s voice is multi-tracked including harmonized layers in the chest voice up to falsetto range. Extremely clipped and inexpressive, almost robotic text delivery. Very little use of air for this pitch range, sounds pressed. |
| **Transition** | “And don’t it make you sad about it?”  
|                | Solo line in chest voice, more expressive than anything heard in verses or pre-choruses: uses wider melodic range, melisma, and increased vibrato—reading as more emotionally expressive. |
| **Choruses**   | Part 1: “You told me you loved me, why did you leave me…”  
|                | Part 1: Similar expressive style to transitions, but uses multi-tracked voice with both chest and falsetto.  
|                | Part 2: “Cry me a river, cry me a river…”  
|                | Part 2: Entirely in falsetto voice. Continued use of vibrato (specifically at ends of phrases), yet lyric presentation remains somewhat restrained, phrases are not drawn out. |
| **Bridge**     | “The damage is done so I guess I’ll be leaving.”  
|                | This contrasting section features a male rapper (not Timberlake) with a much lower voice, delivered in a style more similar to speaking: narrow pitch range, words not embellished or drawn out. |
| **Final Chorus → Coda** | Final Chorus: “You don’t have to say…”  
|                | Coda: “Cry me a river…”  
|                | Part 2 of chorus (“Cry me a river”) overlaid with Timberlake’s falsetto voice seemingly improvising. This improvisatory voice is Timberlake’s most highly embellished (vibrato, melisma) and emotive presentation. Here, Timberlake also reaches the highest vocal range of the song.  
|                | Coda continues improvisatory falsetto voice, but “Cry me a river” changes to a chest voice presentation most similar to a speaking style. |

Figure 2.1 Timberlake’s Vocal Style in “Cry Me a River”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verses</td>
<td>“You were my sun, you were my earth…”</td>
<td>Sung in chest voice, draws out words both with melisma and nasal emphasis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I know that they say…”</td>
<td>Often draws out ends of phrases with melisma. This increased use of melisma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>creates greater melodic range than Timberlake’s version, despite being the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>same melodic line. Phrases sometimes begin with scoops down into Silveira’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>lowest range.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Choruses</td>
<td>“You don’t have to say, what you did…”</td>
<td>Uses harmonizing backing vocalist (but not multi-tracked), both in chest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>voice range. Stylistically the same as the pre-chorus, definitely not</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>clipped at all like Timberlake’s version.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Transition area is nonexistent in Silveira’s rendition, as this part of the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>text fits seamlessly with the vocal style produced in both the verses and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>pre-choruses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choruses</td>
<td>Part 1: “You told me you loved me, why did you leave me…”</td>
<td>Part 1: Continued use of backing vocals, same style. Nearly every phrase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Part 2: “Cry me a river, cry me a river…”</td>
<td>drawn out with nasal embellishment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Part 2: All in falsetto range between Silveira and the backing vocalist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Given generally more air than Timberlake’s falsetto; languid, not clipped.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge</td>
<td>“The damage is done so I guess I’ll be leaving.”</td>
<td>First time spoken, then sung, dipping into low range. With each repetition,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>the phrase becomes more highly embellished with melisma, vibrato, and nasal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>inflections, gaining emotional charge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Chorus</td>
<td>Final Chorus: “You don’t have to say…”</td>
<td>This section is generally a repetition of the previous choruses. However, on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coda</td>
<td>the last repetition of Part 2 of the chorus, Silveira improvises in falsetto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>for a shorter stint much shorter than Timberlake does. Stylistically, it is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
<td></td>
<td>similar both to Silveira’s past presentations as well as Timberlake’s style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>in this section only.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.2 Silveira’s Vocal Style in “Cry Me a River”

The choruses of Timberlake’s “Cry Me A River” do contain a wider range of emotional inflection than the verses (increased dynamic range, use of falsetto, more melisma), yet for the most part maintain the restrained style. Hawkins states, “It is well known that the regulation of emotional display through all forms of artistic expression determines the tightly regulated
behavioral patterns in males. Yet, not all emotions have to be restrained. As David Plummer asserts, anger and happiness are permissible because they stand for strength and therefore do not threaten the primary order of masculinity.” In the narrative of “Cry Me A River,” Timberlake has been transgressed by an unfaithful lover who, in turn, desires his forgiveness. Out of resentment and anger, Timberlake tells her, “Your bridges are burned, and now it's your turn to cry / Cry me a river, cry me a river.” Between his reprehensive lyrics and his emotionally reserved singing style, Timberlake sets up what ought to be a hegemonic male persona in “Cry Me A River.”

Although Timberlake uses musical control and emotional restraint (alongside his frequent visual depiction with beautiful women) to construct an image of normative masculinity in “Cry Me A River,” certain musical elements transgress these boundaries, queering Timberlake’s image. Wayne Kostenbaum describes falsetto as “a useful pleasure with a bad reputation.” For Timberlake, the singing style undoubtedly becomes just that, both sexualizing his music and deconstructing the hegemonic masculine imagery of its narratives.

The timing of Timberlake’s use of falsetto is carefully controlled throughout “Cry Me A River.” The only sections contained entirely within the falsetto range (not multi-tracked with chest-voice and falsetto, as some sections are) occur during the pre-choruses when Timberlake sings, “You don’t have to say what you did, I already know, I found out from him / Now there’s just no chance for you and me, there’ll never be,” and also during the choruses when he repeats “Cry me a river,” four times through. Timberlake’s singing style in the pre-chorus is nearly

---

214 As portrayed in music videos from Justified.
robotic between the unnaturalness of his constricted, high tones and his preemptive clipping of words’ ends. In both the pre-chorus and chorus, Timberlake’s lyrics condemn his female partner’s behavior, acting within the realm of Plummer’s socially acceptable male emotional display. While Timberlake’s falsetto may intensify the strong emotions of bitterness and resentment in the lyrics, it counters his normative masculinity, queering his presentation.

Following the second repetition of verse, pre-chorus, and chorus, “Cry Me A River” contains a contrasting section featuring a male rapper. Timberlake’s multi-tracked voice harmonizes “Oh” in a Gospel style in the background with itself as the rapper repeats, “The damage is done so I guess I’ll be leaving.” In “[Un]Justified,” Hawkins comments on the frequent use of rap sections in Timberlake’s music, stating, “If we dwell on the type of response rapping evokes, delivered in a register considerably lower than J.T.’s affected, nasal falsetto, we might conclude that it signifies a macho element that contrasts with the artist’s own identity […] the rap passage evokes sentiments that convey a different form of masculinity.” In the case of “Cry Me A River,” the rapper’s voice may be the most traditionally masculine voice voice on the track, as it is lower in pitch, darker in timbre, and more grounded in the chest than Timberlake’s high, breathy range. This rap section, appearing about two-thirds into the song, counters listeners’ conventions of masculinity, established previously only through Timberlake’s lyrics. The entrance of a more masculine voice once again queers Timberlake’s singing, reducing the value of his previously established maleness.

Justin Timberlake’s lyrics, which depict heteronormative love narratives in conjunction with his portrayal alongside attractive women in his music videos, create a normative picture of

---

217 Ibid, 205.
his masculine identity. However, Timberlake’s selected use of falsetto undercuts the masculinity of his lyrics, queering his intentions. It is quite interesting, then, to compare Lucas Silveira’s—a transgender man’s—depiction of “Cry Me A River,” and the issues it raises in light of Silveira’s transgressive gender identity.

The Cliks’ rendition of “Cry Me A River” appears on their second album, *Snakehouse*, from 2007. At this time, Lucas Silveira had long been publicly out as transgender, but was not yet using testosterone, and was openly occupying an ambiguous gender identity. The Cliks’ version of “Cry Me A River” differs greatly in instrumentation from the original. The band uses only drums, bass, slightly distorted electric guitar, Silveira’s voice, and the occasional backing vocals of another band member. There are no obvious additional electronic effects, no independent vocal lines aside from Silveira’s, and no vocal multitracking. The song is adapted slightly for a more characteristically punk or alternative rock style—the chords are paired down and unembellished, the rhythms simple, and the only melodic line is provided by the voice. The key of the song is brought up a half step (from G-sharp Minor to A Minor), likely to accommodate the higher range of Silveira’s pre-testosterone voice. Interestingly, Silveira’s style is largely the same throughout the entire track and is far less segmented with contrasting styles than is Timberlake’s version.218

In his version of “Cry Me A River,” Silveira’s vocal inflections, portrayal of emotions, and musical choices, like the use of head voice or chest voice, create additional differences in interpretation between the two versions of “Cry Me A River.” As noted earlier, Timberlake’s style of singing in the chest-voice is often light, emotionally restrained, and is produced using

218 See figures 2.1 and 2.2 on pp. 79-80 for a side by side stylistic comparison.
lots of air. Conversely, Silveira’s voice is more open-throated, rooted in the chest than in the mask or head. Silveira also uses a wider and generally louder dynamic range, in addition to embellishing the melody with a great deal of melisma. Where Timberlake’s delivery of lyrics is often punctuated or clipped, Silveira is languid, leaning into phrases, drawing out the ends. His tone is seductive as he scoops down into the beginnings of phrases, later allowing them to taper softly with nasal diminuendos and flirtatious, light vibrato. These basic differences contribute to a noticeable contrast in styles between The Cliks and Justin Timberlake, and additionally convey emotion and communicate gender differently as well.

Although Silveira is able to match Timberlake’s falsetto range, it is necessary to note that because of his biologically female vocal structure, the timbre of Silveira’s “falsetto” range prior to his hormone replacement therapy was not consistent with Timberlake’s production mechanisms, and subsequently, Timberlake’s falsetto timbre. In their scientific study on vocal production, Kreiman and Sidtis write, “falsetto occurs at the upper frequency limits of a speaker’s vocal range, but also reflects a different vibratory mode for the vocal folds. In falsetto, the vocal folds vibrate and come into contact only at the free borders, while the rest of the fold remains relatively still. The folds appear long, stiff, very thin, and may be somewhat bow-shaped.” Silveira’s vocal folds, likely shorter and thinner than Timberlake’s (or any biologically born male’s, for that matter) due to his biological female assignment, were likely able to vibrate in this high pitch range without switching mechanisms to the falsetto mode of voice production, resulting in a more clear and ringing female head voice.

---

The first appearance of falsetto in Timberlake’s recording of “Cry Me A River” occurs on the last word of the first verse, “But I bet that you didn’t they would come crashing down, no.” Timberlake then continues the entire pre-chorus in falsetto. The Cliks’ version, however, features a descending melisma on the same “no,” with the bridge sung almost entirely in the chest voice. Silveira chooses to highlight only one word of the pre-chorus with his head voice: “You don’t have to say what you did, I already know, I found out from him.”

Silveira’s slide up to the word, “him,” is sung softly and embellished with a light, ringing vibrato, sounding far more feminine (through pitch, tone, and inflection) than anything sung previously by in the track. Placing a musical emphasis on a section of the text that reasserts the narrator’s hegemony (male’s girlfriend is unfaithful with other male) should presumably support the singer’s masculinity, however, Silveira’s feminine inflection (intentional or not) queers the gender boundaries of this passage.

Silveira’s choices regarding contour and inflection create a less emotionally static version of “Cry Me A River,” than Timberlake’s original. Silveira’s singing often stretches syllables, features an increased use of melismatic embellishment, and employs more vibrato, particularly towards the ends of phrases. Silveira also makes much greater use of an expansive dynamic range, crescendoing and diminuendoing within phrases in a way that Timberlake’s reserved delivery mostly avoids. In regard to this track, Elias Krell states, “Silveira performs a variety of emotions: sadness, anger, and the particular despair that attaches to betrayal. He sings with a great deal of energy behind his voice, at times pushing it to the edge of phonation. Silveira’s version has a contour of emotionality, beginning with audibly suppressed anger, only to exploit
and explode that emotion later in the song.” Here, Krell details the exact emotional expressivity that Hawkins cites (via Plummer) as the downfall of masculine stoicism. Going by this philosophy, it is the inflections of grief and despair conveyed by Silveira’s voice which break through masculinity’s boundaries, queering his performance of heteronormative masculinity.

Despite the fact that Silveira’s performance of anguish promotes a feminine reading of his identity and seemingly reduces his masculine stoicism, his inflections of anger dismantle these elements of femininity. According to Krell, this performance of gender ambiguity “opens out spaces for nonnormative performances of (trans) masculinity.” A comparison of Silveira’s and Timberlake’s versions of “What Goes Around… Comes Around,” reveals changes in Silveira’s interpretation decisions of Timberlake’s original, following Silveira’s hormone replacement therapy, and new construction of masculinity.

“What Goes Around… Comes Around”

Nearly five years after the release of *Snakehouse* in 2007, Lucas Silveira produced his next Timberlake rendition, “What Goes Around… Comes Around,” (originally released by Timberlake as a part of his 2006 album *FutureSex/LoveSounds*) in early 2012. Silveira’s cover of this second Timberlake track differs from his recreation of “Cry Me A River,” as “What Goes Around” was not recorded professionally (likely by way of webcam), featuring just Silveira and

---

220 Krell, “Contours through Covers,” 481.
221 Ibid, 484.
his guitar, uploaded to his YouTube page. There has been no professional recording or label release of Silveira’s version of this track.

In between Silveira’s recordings of “Cry Me A River” and “What Goes Around,” noticeable changes began to take place on the singer’s voice as a result of hormone replacement therapy. In his recording of “What Goes Around,” Silveira’s voice changed noticeably, darkening a bit in color, lowering in pitch. He no longer strains to reach into his lower register, but high notes are now less within reach coming across as scratchy and less clear. The Cliks’ cover of “Cry Me A River” is transposed up a half step from the original key, most likely to accommodate Silveira’s pre-T voice. Silveira’s rendition of “What Goes Around,” however, is performed in Timberlake’s original key of A minor, and the highest pitched sung by both musicians is D5.

One noticeable difference in Lucas Silveira’s second Timberlake cover is the quality and use of his high register. In “Cry Me A River,” Silveira’s highest range sounds feminine, subverting his projections of masculinity. After months of taking testosterone, the timbre of Silveira’s high register changed drastically, resulting in an entirely new sound for his cover of “What Goes Around.” Silveira’s post-testosterone voice navigates this falsetto range with less ease than his former high range. While he sings in tune and embellishes with vibrato, he uses markedly less melisma and the voice sounds pressed and less resonant.

Justin Timberlake’s original recording of “What Goes Around” makes great use of the singer’s falsetto, often multi-tracking it over lines also sung an octave down throughout the pre-choruses and choruses. In the chorus, Timberlake sings “What goes around, goes around,

---

222 As described in greater detail in relation to his YouTube uploads–refer back to pg. 68.
goes around, comes all the way back around,” beginning in falsetto and descending in pitch on the second repetition of the phrase. This line is multi-tracked with a recording of Timberlake singing the same lyrics, holding the highest falsetto pitch. Silveira’s cover of “What Goes Around” contains only a single track in which he chooses to sing the descending line, presenting the first “What goes around” in falsetto, then switching into a descending chest voice for the repetitions. While Silveira may have chosen this arrangement purely for its functionality, it is also possible that Silveira reduced the amount falsetto in this section due to a change in ease and ability needed to produce the same tone quality as in his earlier recordings, gliding effortlessly between registers. Perhaps Silveira also wished to feature his newly acquired lower range.

Silveira’s use of falsetto in “What Goes Around,” serves the opposite purpose of its function in “Cry Me A River.” Prior to hormone replacement therapy, Silveira’s high range took on a distinctly feminine quality with a pure, ringing tone. This conflicting visual imagery of Silveira’s male presentation along with the heteronormative masculine lyrics of “Cry Me A River” resulted in a gender queered, somewhat ambiguous self-presentation. Following hormone replacement therapy, Silveira’s more masculinized falsetto comes with less ease, is noticeably scratchy and a bit strained, causing it to lose its feminine quality. This struggle to produce a clear, high voice for Silveira, in a way, reaffirms his new physical masculinity, as the falsetto is executed, but just barely achieved.

Silveira’s decision to not employ falsetto in some areas where Timberlake does helps to reassert his masculinity in places where Timberlake’s is queered. In the pre-chorus, Timberlake sings the lines, “Don’t want to think about it / Don’t want to talk about it / I’m just so sick about it,” and “Just so confused about it / Feeling the blues about it / Just can’t do without ya,” entirely
in falsetto. In the chorus, Timberlake then alternates between chest voice and falsetto, highlighting lines such as, “Is this how we say goodbye,” and “You were gonna make me cry.” The types of emotions conveyed in these lyrics—grief, confusion, anxiety—are the impermissibles which detract from the validity of masculinity, as identified by Plummer and Hawkins in [Un]Justified. Silveira’s choice to sing these entire sections in his chest voice prevents a queer reading of his voice. His growling edge sounds unmistakably macho by heteronormative conventions, and lessens the possibility for a feminine interpretation of the lyrics and the feelings they convey.

Lucas Silveira’s recreation of Justin Timberlake’s “Cry Me A River” and “What Goes Around… Comes Around” has helped to affirm Silveira’s gender identities. Silveira’s cover of “Cry Me A River” distorts listeners’ perceptions of a male or female singer, instead utilizing elements typically associated with both. The singer highlights certain passages with his highest-range and lowest-range notes to queer expectations, creating gender ambiguity. Following hormone replacement therapy, Silveira’s second Timberlake cover of “What Goes Around… Comes Around” constructs a more masculine persona. By intentionally avoiding Timberlake’s use of falsetto during emotionally unrestrained passages, Silveira confirms his masculinity. Similarly, the audible change in the quality of Silveira’s falsetto reads to listeners as more distinctly male through its strain and increased roughness. The cover song functions for Silveira as a sheddable skin through which he can use (or not) the musical styles, ideas, and lyrics of Timberlake to emphasize his own gender identity through music and voice.
Conclusion

Following his comparison of the four versions of “Try A Little Tenderness,” in which he analyzes both the musical elements and cultural context surrounding the renditions, Rob Bowman concludes that decisions in musical performance, technique, and style are a reflection of musicians’ own relationships the world around them, confirming and engaging with their societal ideals. The many performances of Lucas Silveira’s career explore, affirm, and celebrate his identity in just these ways, creating a space in which binary norms are transgressed and the perception of gender is expanded.

Silveira’s outward gender ambiguity allowed him a spectrum upon which to transition, disregarding concern for normative expectations of male or female identified singers. This simultaneous performance of male and female qualities and styles is reflected in Silveira’s cover of Justin Timberlake’s “Cry Me A River.” Silveira’s later Timberlake cover of “What Goes Around… Comes Around,” was released following Silveira’s hormone replacement therapy and subsequent vocal change. A comparison of these two works both against one another and with their Timberlake originals reveals the ways in which Silveira has constructed a perceived gender identity through voice and inflection. As was noted previously, discussions of falsetto singing style can easily become controversial. While falsetto may communicate masculinity for musicians like Michael Jackson or Earth, Wind, and Fire, Stan Hawkins asserts entirely different readings of the same sound in regards to Timberlake. While I don’t intend to confl ate falsetto with queerness, or to imply that the two are inextricably intertwined, Silveira’s choices to match

or deviate from Timberlake’s originals raise questions which prove difficult to answer considering the small body of research on the social context of the style.

Lucas Silveira and his music have brought considerations of gender variance into the media’s spotlight, helping this marginalized community of genderqueer musicians and individuals to gain a more greatly respected voice in mainstream society. By actively documenting his own vocal transition over the course of hormone replacement therapy, Silveira has revealed personal and largely unresearched aspects of testosterone-based gender transition. Audio-visual chronologies like Silveira’s, working in conjunction with emerging research on testosterone’s effects on the voice, contribute to a greater understanding of transition options for trans men in addition to enhancing the general public’s understanding of transitioning.
Singer and songwriter Our Lady J is unlike any other performer. From campy, live performances of Dolly Parton covers, to narrative and satirical recorded songs, the artist depicts her multifaceted gender identity through musical endeavors. Our Lady J is a transgender woman with an overly feminized appearance, yet she identities as somewhere in between male and female on the gender spectrum. On her recent album, *Portrait of a Man*, as well as in her live show spectacle, “The Gospel of Dolly,” Our Lady J transgresses boundaries of heteronormativity and hegemonic femininity through her music. Growing up in a Pentecostal household in rural Pennsylvania, the artist received classical training on the piano while coming of age in the Christian church. Although journeys onward to New York City and Los Angeles have taken her far from home, elements of Gospel have found their way into Our Lady J’s music—a style she has lovingly deemed, “Gospel for the Godless.”

After first coming out as queer and later as transgender, Our Lady J has become a social activist and a spokesperson for gender nonconforming people. Advocating for a larger spectrum of accepted gender identities, she laments, “we only have two right now.”224 Considering herself to be parts of both male and female, she feels that “In an ideal world, there wouldn’t be such an

emphasis on gender and we wouldn’t have to think about it so much.” It is clear from her
music that Our Lady J has spent quite a bit of time thinking about it, as she raises issues
surrounding gender and culture through her lyrics.

The following chapter explores Our Lady J’s gender nonconforming identity as a
transgender female and the ways in which she critiques heteronormativity and celebrates
diversity through her music and performances. Our Lady J’s recorded singles and album, Picture
of a Man, comment on transgender experience by constructing a variety of characters—the diva,
the tragic protagonist, the “everyday” transwoman—through musical style and lyrics. Her
exaggerated womanliness in her live performances of Dolly Parton covers offers satirical
commentary on conventional ideals of femininity. Our Lady J’s position as a transgender and
gender nonconforming person afford her the position to both explore and humorously exploit
gender conventions through her music and performances.

**Picture of a Man**

Our Lady J’s first full-length album, Picture of a Man, was released in 2013. The work
spans a variety of styles, draws upon different musical techniques, and even depicts various
characters. In an interview for New Now Next with Dan Avery, Our Lady J describes her
intentions for the work, stating, “I explore the trans experience on the album. A lot of the songs
are about what its like to be a transgender person in society… What is gender, how do we get

---

past gender?" Exploration, indeed, is a suitable description of the album’s theme, as Our Lady J covers topics ranging from hegemonic expectation and transgression, to self-worth, even parodying gender conventions. In this section, I examine one of Our Lady J’s single releases as well as two tracks from *Picture of a Man*, considering musical, lyrical, and stylistic choices as channels through which the artist depicts her multifaceted gender identity and explores her experiences as a transgender person. The works I’ve selected all construct narratives through their lyrics and varying musical styles that center around the experiences of particular characters. These individual characters can be interpreted as facets of Our Lady J’s own identity, that help the artist to explore experiences from her life while creating a dialogue that stems from the underlying themes of her song.

The title track of Our Lady J’s first album, *Picture of a Man*, is a transgender response to heteronormative masculinity. The song’s lyrics deal with societal expectations for masculine appearance and duties. Our Lady J switches between moments of self-reference, “You take a picture of a man, and tell me this is what I look like. Forget about my going, forget what this feels like,” to more general cultural critiques, “You take a picture of a man, and you burden him with false pretension. You need him to boost your economy, You need him to fire your artillery.” “Picture of a Man” depicts the stereotypical male as a fighter, manipulated by cultural expectations “So he will fight your [...] muthafuckin dirty, muthafuckin wars.” By

---

227 Our Lady J, “Picture of a Man,” on *Picture of a Man*, 2013, Our Lady J Records, MP3.
228 Ibid.
comparing her own trans identity to the hyper-masculinized male, Our Lady J queers boundaries of maleness and hegemonic expectation.

“Picture of a Man,” is composed in the style Our Lady J is best known for—a merging of musical theater and Gospel. The singer’s delivery of lyrics often evokes the sound of musical theater through her articulate and exaggerated enunciation of words, and her bold, chest voice “belt.” “Picture of a Man,” begins with an introduction featuring improvisatory, Gospel-style piano accompaniment supporting Our Lady J’s solo voice line:

You take a Picture of A Man, and you tell me this is what healthy looks like.

Once a day will soothe my going, once a day will make it alright.

You take a Picture of A Man, and you tell me this is what I look like.

Forget about my going, forget what this feels like.229

Our Lady J sings in an ambiguous vocal range: although she dips down as low as the pitch F2, she sings mainly between the C3 and C4 octaves, her highest pitch being F4 on this track. Her diction is clear and articulate, rarely embellished with melisma or vibrato. The song’s opening verse is sung mainly in the artist’s head voice range, and although her singing is light and somewhat breathy, it never lacks power. In the first verse, Our Lady J’s voice becomes more bolder with an increased dynamic, using more chest resonance. She adds a background chorus of her own layered voice—created with vocal harmonizer technology—creating an intentionally mechanized sounding gospel choir.230 Momentum builds as instrumental layers are added to the track in the second chorus: piano, drums, tambourine, synthesized strings, and more active

229 Ibid.
230 Our Lady J often jokingly refers to herself as a “sex change cyborg,” referenced frequently by the electronic manipulation of vocals, her creation of artificiality, in her music. Johnny McGovern, “Hey Qween!”
backing vocals. This opening track on *Picture of a Man* closely resembles Our Lady J’s singing style made famous by her live show, “The Gospel of Dolly.” During her show, discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, Our Lady J articulates her lyrics with extreme clarity, emphasizes words through nasality and clipped syllables, and sings with the musical theater “belt” of a full chest voice. By kicking off *Portrait of a Man* in her best known style and by using lyrics to comment on trans experiences, Our Lady J sets the stage for an open exploration of transgender topics through varying musical styles.

*Picture of a Man*’s second track, “Elegance,” depicts the story of a woman defeated by her quest for acceptance. “Elegance” begins with the roboticized delivery of lyrics that might reflect the inner monologue of a model—a girl’s set of self-directed instructions on how to appear beautiful and elegant. The track opens with arpeggiated chords on the piano—C minor, F major in second inversion, B♭ major—followed by imitative vocals. Our Lady J uses vocal harmonizer technology\(^\text{231}\) to simultaneously layer her own voice in chordal harmonies. She sings in a mechanical style, pausing between syllables and truncating the ends of words, creating the sound of a robotic choir. The harmonizer technology produces a wide pitch range of low tenor voices, up to high soprano, blurring any clear intentions of gendering. Our Lady J’s “choir” sings:

> Press, paint put together body. Turn, turn, turn, bevel walk, walk.

> Smile, flirt, flirt, smile, flirt, laugh, tits, out. Pause, tilt your head, throw your hair back.

> Run-way walk for realness, children stop and stare, people gather.

\(^{231}\) Similar to the harmonizer used in Imogen Heap’s “Hide and Seek,” and Peter Gabriel’s “Mercy Street,” for example.
Now you own the spotlight, you're a star and nothing else matters.\textsuperscript{232}

The lyrics of “Elegance” continue narrating the sad story of a woman\textsuperscript{233} beset by standards of beauty and conventional womanliness, fighting for acceptance and failing.

While both “Picture of a Man” and “Elegance” grapple with the problems of conventional gender expectations for trans men and women, their texts depict different protagonists. The trans character in “Picture of a Man” recognizes the discrimination and expectations they face, and refutes them. Our Lady J sings, “So it is here among the dead that I find life. It is here in the ashes that I find where I am going,” creating a sense of rebirth from the war-like destruction portrayed by the song’s lyrics.\textsuperscript{234} “Elegance,” however, serves as a eulogy for a woman, defeated even through her efforts to be accepted. The first verse begins, “Here lies a girl who swallowed her sharpest swords, just to show you that she had elegance. Here lies a girl who raged a silent war, just to show you that she had it all under control.”\textsuperscript{235} The robotic sound created through articulation and harmonizer technology at the beginning of “Elegance” hints at a brainwashed mainstream culture, mechanically performing expected markers of femininity. When the lyrics quote the protagonist—“She said, I stand for elegance. I live for elegance. I breathe for elegance. I’ll die for elegance.”\textsuperscript{236}—Our Lady J leans into the words “stand,” “live,” and “breathe,” singing them at a powerful dynamic, drawing out the words’ length. On the following word “elegance,” Our Lady J backs off, quickly and lightly releasing the last syllable. These contrasting styles evoke an emotional longing and extremity (to live, breathe, and die) for

\textsuperscript{233} Likely a transwoman, but not explicitly revealed by the lyrics.
\textsuperscript{234} Our Lady J, “Portrait of a Man.”
\textsuperscript{235} Our Lady J, “Elegance.”
\textsuperscript{236} Ibid.
the song’s main topic, “elegance,” a word that leaves Our Lady J’s lips quickly and breathily, emulating the stately air of high-society articulation. “Elegance” problematizes societal expectations of gender and our high cultural value placed on appearance by sonically constructing the tragic character that Our Lady J’s lyrics create.

Our Lady J’s single, “Pink Prada Purse,” released in 2009 did not make its way onto her list of tracks for *Picture of a Man*, but the song remains on her website and social media outlets alongside the full length album.237 “Pink Prada Purse” features yet another character in Our Lady J’s arsenal, and is entirely unique in its musical style. Before the music begins, Our Lady J speaks in a breathy, seductive voice, “A-one, a-two, a-you know what to do.” The music that follows is entirely unexpected, and vastly different from Our Lady J’s famous gospel-influenced style. A flute improvises a jazzy solo atop a syncopated Brazilian samba rhythm of eighth-eighth, sixteenth-eighth-sixteenth. The violins pluck a syncopated, descending pizzicato D minor arpeggio while the accordion maintains a steady offbeat pulse. Background singers enter, singing “doo, doo doos,” in a high tessitura. Overall, the effect is overwhelmingly trebly and sugary sweet. While the samba rhythm could evoke the relaxed, cool effect of mid-20th century cosmopolitan Bossa Nova, instead the high pitched rhythms in their rigid meter read as high strung, even somewhat sassy.

Our Lady J enters singing in a light, unusually high-pitched, head voice. There is a hint of mockery in Our Lady J’s voice, as though she’s parodying an intentionally fake female voice. In their article “Aerodynamic Analysis of Male-to-Female Transgender Voice,” Mary Gorham-Rowan and Richard Morris attempt to unpack the physiological

---

ways in which transwomen can manipulate their voices to create more a normative female vocal range, cadence, and inflection. Gorham-Rowan and Morris cite a thin voice, increased breathiness, and “vocal variability in pitch, contour, duration, and intonation” (particularly rising contour), as commonly understood markers of vocal femininity.\textsuperscript{238} Although her pitch range stays within her typical tessitura, Our Lady J clearly manipulates her speech patterns to sound more conventionally feminine in many of these ways in this particular recording.

“Pink Prada Purse” is a narrative of love and revenge, told from the perspective of the song’s protagonist: a betrayed and enraged ex-girlfriend. The lyrics, in conjunction with their vocal delivery, are clearly intended to be satirical. Our Lady J constructs a parody of an insecure girl, approached by her former lover as she sings:

What do I do when he comes over here?
What do I say when he asks me “How are you doing?”
“Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha!”
I’ll just laugh and say “I’m fine… but kinda lonely.”
“Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha!
“And your girlfriend’s really cute… but kinda fat.”\textsuperscript{239}

The protagonist’s insecurity quickly dissolves into neuroticism as she says:

I’ll laugh so he won’t hear me crying,
I’ll laugh so he won’t know I’m dying,

\textsuperscript{239} Our Lady J, “Pink Prada Purse.”
I’ll laugh to forget just how much he hurt me.

‘Cuz nothin’s gonna hurt me now, nothin’s gonna hurt me.

You can’t hurt me–because I got a gun\footnote{Ibid.}.

Our Lady J continues the stereotypical parody of the crazy-in-love, vengeful woman who pulls a gun from her pink Prada purse, shooting her ex-boyfriend and his new mate. She adds, sarcastically, “Thank God I’m not the type of girl who holds a silly grudge.”\footnote{Ibid.}

“Pink Prada Purse” serves as a satirical commentary on the stereotyping of femininity through campiness. Although Our Lady J’s performance is captured only through audio, she vocalizes conventional signifiers of female speech patterns, singing with a breathy quality, and a wide melodic contour, and exaggerated articulation of text. Our Lady J sometimes rushes her lyrics or begins speaking at higher pitches, using a constricted, non-resonant sound to communicate excitement. Our Lady J sings in this style leading up to the song’s climax: “So I puff on my fag, takin’ one last drag, I reach into my bag and grab my Fourty-Four Mag.”\footnote{Ibid.} Throughout the entire line, Our Lady J’s contour heightens, as her voice becomes pressed, conveying a sense of anticipation and urgency. It is through this parody of the overemotional and unrestrained woman that Our Lady J is able to depict yet another facet of her identity. As will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, Our Lady J makes frequent use of hyper-feminization and parody in her live performances as a route for social commentary on gender stereotypes and hegemony.
When taken in isolation, each of Our Lady J’s songs offers a different narrative that comments in some way on queer or transgender culture, issues, and stereotypes. Collectively, her output paints a larger picture of her social views and political activism. Varying in musical style and lyrical content, Our Lady J’s recorded songs help portray many different aspects of her multifaceted gender identity.

**The Gospel of Dolly**

Our Lady J has gained notoriety not only for her recorded work, but also through her live show, “The Gospel of Dolly.” The performance stars Our Lady J, but features a host of soloists, a band, additional back-up singers, and gospel choir complete with conductor, all performing renditions of country music’s famed Dolly Parton. Our Lady J refers to the spectacle as “Gospel for the Godless,” what she describes as gospel music “scrubbed [...] free of the religion.” In an interview with Our Lady J for *New Now Next*, writer Dan Avery describes Dolly Parton as the performer’s “patron saint.” Having discovered “The Gospel of Dolly,” Parton reached out to Our Lady J; “She approves of the show,” Our Lady J tells Avery, “and she asked to meet me actually, and just thanked me for singing her songs.”

Although inspired by Parton’s work, Our Lady J is no mere Dolly impersonator. She recalls the project’s beginnings: “I started doing these gospel shows, I was doing a couple

---

243 “Johnny McGovern’s Hey Qween! with Our Lady J.”

244 Dan Avery, “Our Lady J Finds Her Place at the Table with New Album, “Picture of a Man.”

245 Ibid.
[Parton] covers, and then that turned into an entire Dolly evening, [...] where I sing all of her gospel music, and it kind of caught on fire. It was meant to just be a one time show, and now I do it at least once a year.”246 Our Lady J’s website boasts critical acclaim for “The Gospel of Dolly,” celebrated by New York Magazine, The Village Voice, and The Huffington Post, just to name a few.247

Dolly Parton has long been known for her camped-up, over the top embodiment of womanliness, and her performance of femininity has been interpreted by certain scholars as drag.248 The following pages explore the gender identity depicted through Our Lady J’s performances of Dolly Parton covers, both performers’ relationships to drag queening, Judith Butler’s discussions of drag and its relationship to gender performativity, and the ways in which “The Gospel of Dolly” transgresses boundaries of normative gender identities.

In her article, “Mountains of Contradictions: Gender, Class, and Region in the Star Image of Dolly Parton” Pamela Wilson asserts: “The Dolly persona embodies (there being no other word for it) excessive womanliness, in any interpretation.”249 Sky-high blonde curls, a painted face, and curvaceous, womanly physique, Parton is country music’s “Backwoods Barbie.”250 Many scholars claim that Parton’s image is an intentional facade, created to offer social critique. Samantha Christensen’s article, “‘Where it counts I’m real’: The Complexities of Dolly Parton’s

246 Ibid.
248 As it has been by a host of authors, including primarily Pamela Wilson and Samantha Christensen.
Feminist Voice,” explores Parton’s construction of an intentionally inflated femininity within the context of a male dominated genre. Christensen states, “Through her overstated and excessively flashy outward image, Parton parodies the male tradition of the jewelry-clad country music star and creates a cartoonish and satirical hyper-feminized image.” By amplifying the expectations of a culturally heteronormative female, Parton fights back—tongue-in-cheek—against the misogynist culture of country music.

In both her “Gospel of Dolly” performances and day to day life, Our Lady J presents herself in a similarly campy fashion. Our Lady J’s long blonde hair calls to mind a modernized Dolly look. She often appears heavily made up, her nails (or perhaps an article of clothing) sparkling with glitter or sequins. The artist proudly flaunts her recently constructed breasts—paid for in part with the assistance of Parton herself—funded by Our Lady J’s December 2009 benefit auction and concert, “Boob Aid.” In an article for The New York Times, Our Lady J describes her cross country relocation to interviewer Michael Musto, claiming to have moved from New York to San Francisco for “the sunshine and the silicone.” Jokingly, she adds, “All the Beverly Hills wives look like gorgeous transsexuals, [...] L.A. is postgender in that way. You can’t tell who was born what.”

On the queer online talk show, “Hey Qween!” Our Lady J jokes with host Johnny McGovern, saying “Sometimes I like to call myself a faggot in a dress, that’s how I like to

---

identify some days.” With this quip, Our Lady J gets at a deeper sense of her trans identity. Considering herself as combination of both male and female, Our Lady J never aimed to be “just a heterosexual woman.” She explains, “that’s not what I’m looking for [...] I’m not really comfortable assuming one label right now.”

Although Our Lady J identifies as a transgender woman who refutes traditional binary gender identities and roles, she performs “Gospel of Dolly” shows in the campy and exaggeratedly feminine style of her idol, offering a sardonic parody of gender conventions through a performance style which shares many characteristics with drag queening. While “The Gospel of Dolly,” is performed only as a live show, some amateur recordings of select numbers have been uploaded to the internet. One particular recording features a performance of Parton’s hit, “9 to 5,” from Our Lady J’s show at Joe’s Pub in New York City. The singer sits poised to play in front of a baby grand piano. Dressed for the occasion, Our Lady J dons a sequined top and skirt, striped tights, glittery boots and glovelets. On her head sits a small, vintage military style hat.

Our Lady J looks out at the audience and smiles coyly as she begins to tap out the famous rhythm from “9 to 5” on a small typewriter sitting atop her piano. Despite the fact that the quality of the recording is low and sounds a bit muffled, Our Lady J’s clear, articulate voice shines through. Accompanied only by the rhythmic clicking of the typewriter keys, Our Lady J draws out the phrases of Parton’s original recording, pausing between lines of text:

253 “Johnny McGovern’s Hey Qween! with Our Lady J.”
254 She elaborates, “Well, I mean everyone’s a bit of both. If gender really is a construct, which it is, everyone is a bit man and a bit woman.” Ibid.
255 Ibid.
Tumble out of bed and stumble to the kitchen, (Pause)

Pour myself a cup of ambition. (Pause)

Our Lady J places her own inflections on the following line of text: “Yawn and stretch and try to come,” (leaned into as “coh-humm”) “to li-i-ife,” playfully drawing out the last word of the phrase. Far from Parton’s original country inflections and style, Our Lady J’s background as a musical theater voice coach rings clearly through her performance. Our Lady J’s voice is a full, bold chest voice. She uses little vibrato, aside from the occasional ends of phrases, and shapes her words using a forward, nasal placement, exaggeratedly articulating syllables.

Bourne, Maëva, and Kenny describe this style of singing in their article, "Music theater voice: Production, physiology and pedagogy," as the traditional musical theater “belt,” produced from the “chest or thyroarytenoid, resulting in a “dominant sound with “forward,” “twangy” vowels.” According to the authors, this belt is often achieved with “a high larynx and tongue, narrower pharyngeal space, and high lung pressures,” can be loud, and may use nasality to shape character. Our Lady J relies on this style of vocal production to sing clearly—enough to be heard over her loud ensemble—and playfully, to shape words and emphasize certain sounds and syllables.

Following the end of the first verse, Our Lady J glissandos down the keyboard to begin the chorus, where her band and additional singers join in. The camera pans to the right to reveal two male backup singers, a bassist, guitarist, drummer, and Gospel choir of at least eight (adorned in classic, bright yellow robes), directed by their own conductor. The momentum of the chorus section increases, with all musicians playing and the dozen or so singers producing a

---


258 Ibid, 440.
bold, full-throated sound. Whereas the piano in Parton’s original plays a straight eighth-note pattern throughout the chorus, Our Lady J plays a chordal accompaniment, also incorporating riffs articulated by a horn section in the original, including the tension-building, chromatic ascending line beneath the lyrics, “It’s enough to drive you crazy if you let it!”

As the second verse begins, the band drops out once again as Our Lady J sings the solo line, accompanying herself on the typewriter. This time, however, the choir joins in the background, boldly singing open-throated harmonized “ahhs,” much more prominently than Parton’s Gospel-style background singers, who are balanced more softly in the original recording’s mix. While Our Lady J’s performance of “9 to 5” does not musically stray far from Parton’s original, the singer performs with the flair of her own style, rooted in musical theater performance tradition, enhanced with a soulful gospel-style choir.

Considering her multifaceted gender identity, it is difficult to discern how Our Lady J’s performance of Dolly Parton music relates to drag. According to Rachel Devitt, “Traditional notions of drag appear at first glance to be predicated on a sex-based performative cross accomplished through costume and mannerisms.” Devitt’s article “Girl on Girl: Fat Femmes, Bio-Queens, and Redefining Drag” explores drag performances that transgress a binary gender crossing paradigm, as she focuses on the “Queen Bees,” a group of drag performers ranging in identities from straight to queer, and cisgender to transgender. If Dolly Parton’s performance of hyper-femininity is to be interpreted as cisgender female performance of female drag, then Our Lady J’s gender nonconforming performance of female drag must be considered in light of the complexities of her identity.

---

Katie Horowitz’s article “The Trouble with ‘Queerness’: Drag and the Making of Two Cultures,” explores the intersection of drag queening and drag kinging through ethnographic studies conducted at Bounce night club in Cleveland, Ohio. Describing male-performing-female drag queens, Horowitz asserts, “queens celebrate what sociologist Raewyn Connell might call hegemonic femininity: the dominant temporally and culturally specific ideal.” She continues, “In contemporary US culture, the hegemonic norm is straight, white, wealthy, able bodied, and, regardless of domestic and career choices, unambiguously female in appearance.”

This hegemonic femininity, Devitt explains, is described by Judith Halberstam as “simply costume,” even when performed by cisgender women. According to Devitt, “drag queens employ “outrageous artificiality” in order to further emphasize the performativity of femininity.” Dolly Parton performs “outrageous artificiality” in her construction of womanliness, exploiting femininity in the same ways as drag queens, despite her gender identification as full-time female.

Devitt introduces a paradigm for performers like Parton—the femme drag queen, also known as the “bio-queen.” “She is at once campy and earnest, parodist and ecdysiast, all girl and then some, and she has an expertly manicured nail at the ready to rip drag up into something new, titillating and meaningful once again.” The femme queen, according to Devitt, reveals the performative nature of gender, as, unlike male-performing-female drag queening, femme queening “does not depend on an assumed incongruity between ‘actual’ and staged gender.”

Our Lady J’s performance reflects what Pamela Wilson has described as Dolly Parton’s

261 Devitt, “Girl on Girl,” 33.
262 Ibid, 33.
263 Ibid, 29.
264 Ibid, 30.
“manipulation and burlesquing of femininity.”²⁶⁵ Although Our Lady J was not born female and identifies as “a bit of both,” her non-normative identity and staged hyper-femininity as a musical entertainer prove incongruent in the way Devitt describes. The hazy line between Our Lady J’s drag performance of Parton standards and her day-to-day presentation of gender identity transgresses the boundaries of the binary switching of typical drag queening. Performing inflated womanliness as part of “The Gospel of Dolly,” Our Lady J’s carefully constructed parody of heteronormative femininity aligns closely with Devitt’s femme-queen.

In an interview with the Huffington Post’s Noah Michelson, Our Lady J describes in detail her recent relationship with gender:

Well, I feel like I bounced back and forth on the binary, kind of like a slingshot, because I was trying so hard to fit in as a man–really, really trying to be butch to no avail. And so when I decided that I was going to go for it and, in the eyes of society at least, become a woman, even though I consider myself more genderqueer–if you have to check male or female, I’m going to check female–if there was a third box I would check that. So, I bounced into this super feminine world because I thought that’s what I must be. We’re given such black and white definitions of gender to play with. And then I felt that that felt really awkward. I don’t enjoy all of the stereotypical female things and so after a couple years of that early on in my transition I sort of swayed back towards the center of things.²⁶⁶

Although Our Lady J has swayed towards the middle, her appearance as a performer—inflatedly feminine—might suggest otherwise to audiences. With her non-binary gender identity and camped-up style, Our Lady J challenges normative paradigms of gender and performance. In her chapter “Gender is Burning,” Judith Butler suggests:

There is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and [...] drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms. At best, it seems, drag is a site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes.267

Our Lady J’s hyper-femininity denaturalizes Butler’s “hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms,” in that her performance emanates from a genderqueer body. Our Lady J’s costume is a transparent one: her aim is not simply to mask biologically masculine traits, but rather to celebrate her contradictions, parodying heteronormativity. Devitt asserts that non-normative identities such as Our Lady J’s lend drag performers greater agency for social commentary. She states, “If drag must entail a cross to the ‘opposite’ of one’s ‘true’ identity, then that original, that biological sex-based identity becomes normalized and immobile, thus denying both the validity of the performer’s self-identified gender and the power a drag performance has in questioning gender ‘realness.’”268 Our Lady J’s queer performance of hegemonic femininity enables her to

critique and parody the performativity of gender norms through the ways she plays with gender expectations from her own unique identity.

**Is Gender Performative?**

In the chapter “Gender is Burning” from her text *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler expands upon her earlier discussions of drag performativity from her work *Gender Trouble*. Butler argues that drag performance reveals the true nature of gender as fundamentally performative. She states, “To claim that all gender is like drag, or is drag, is to suggest that "imitation" is at the heart of the heterosexual project and its gender binarisms, that drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations.”

Here, Butler describes drag as yet another facet of gender and identity construction. Because she explains heteronormative gender not as a naturalized state of being, but as imitative of its own ideals, drag is not to be seen as a transgressor of naturalness, but rather as another range of performed identities, transgressive only of constructed binary hegemony.

Butler’s assertions aid in explaining the agency Our Lady J gains from her drag performance of Dolly Parton covers. By arguing that “drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender,” Butler opens a dialogue that is inclusive of transgender identities such as Our Lady J’s. The artist’s drag performance of hyper-femininity is not contingent upon presumed maleness—her ability to identify as gender nonconforming while

---

269 Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 125.
performing qualifiers of hegemonic womanliness reveals gender as a construction or performance. Butler argues that heteronormative gender itself is “a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations.” Therefore, because Our Lady J identifies as female, yet also performs womanhood as a drag role, it becomes apparent that both heteronormativity and drag performativity strive in the same ways to construct gender identity.

In her article, “The Trouble with ‘Queerness’: Drag and the Making of Two Cultures,” an ethnographic analysis, Katie Horowitz argues against Butler’s notions of performative gender. Horowitz asserts that performativity studies are limiting, in that they presume certain qualifiers for the understanding of identities, societal expectations for queer and transgender/gender nonconforming communities. She states, “Caught between the conviction that identity is always already performed (always context contingent, always demanding to be reproduced) and the negative connotations of performance discourse (fakery, insincerity, falseness, inauthenticity), writers often hedge their bets, wittingly or not, by setting limits on performance.

Instead, Horowitz suggests that identity is constructed through a web of relationships:

I, as a person with an identity that consistently makes me legible as myself to myself and others over time, only exist as a function of relations. And it is the relative consistency of these relations over time that gives weight to gender. Thus, one might be gay or

---

270 “In spite of the philosophical revolution inaugurated by Butler’s argument that gender is a doing rather than a being and that authenticity is a fiction, when we make assumptions about what constitutes queerness and whose lives, voices, and ideas should count as queer ones, we implicitly claim that queerness is essentially something, that it has certain essential elements, and that a discourse that neglects one or more of these elements [...] automatically ceases to be queer.” Horowitz, “The Trouble with “Queerness,”” 315.
masculine or genderqueer but only inasmuch as one does (agentizes) intra-actions that give meaning to gayness or masculinity or genderqueerness.\textsuperscript{272}

By describing identity in relation to interactions and understanding of self and others, Horowitz explains that questions of authenticity become irrelevant. As an example, she maintains that a variety of female identities—biological, masculine, transgender, drag—are all equally relevant, “because the meaning of “woman” is coextensive with each new intra-action.”\textsuperscript{273}

Our Lady J’s persona is largely defined through a series of interactions. Her communication of self as hyper-feminized through both day-to-day appearance and “Gospel of Dolly” performances, her personal statements regarding her feelings of gender nonconformity, as well as her articulations of identity through lyrics, and her portrayal of self as she sings all contribute to the shaping of Our Lady J’s multifaceted gender identity through her interactions and self-understanding. While I do assert that Our Lady J’s drag performances are largely contingent upon gender performativity and parody, I believe that Horowitz’s theory of relationships and intra-action is also relevant. At times, Our Lady J is in performance mode, intentionally articulating conventional markers of gender and heteronormativity. Other times, her complex identity is better understood as a web of inter and intra-relationships, understood through her own words and music as well as the way her identity is interpreted in mainstream culture.

\textsuperscript{272} Ibid, 319-20.
\textsuperscript{273} Ibid, 320.
Conclusion

Self-identified as a “sex change cyborg,” “tranny in a dress,” and “a little bit of both,” Our Lady J’s gender identity is truly unique. An advocate and activist for transgender and gender nonconforming people, Our Lady J refutes binary gender and conventions of gender hegemony. The artist’s first album *Portrait of a Man*, along with her separately released singles, use narrative to depict variant gender identities and issues within the trans and genderqueer community. Our Lady J makes use of different styles to portray the protagonists in her lyrics, both showing off her talent in musical variability as well as constructing her characters sonically.

Our Lady J’s performances of femme-drag, both on her recordings and during her live “Gospel of Dolly” performances, afford her the opportunity to critique conventional gender expectations through her performances of hyper-femininity. While the artist’s live performances rely largely on the visual components of drag, “Pink Prada Purse,” proves Our Lady J’s ability to construct performed gender sonically as well, further enhancing her critiques of the gender binary and its stereotypical poles. While I have chosen to highlight the shared features of Our Lady J’s performances with Rachel Devitt’s “femme-drag” paradigm, problems inherently arise based on the artist’s nonconforming gender identity. I certainly do not intend to imply that Our Lady J’s feminine qualities are all for parody’s sake, as she identifies as female. Rather, I hope to engage with new understandings of gender as multifaceted, performative, and a tool for social critique. Although gender nonconforming identities are still relatively new to mainstream

---

274 Johnny McGovern, “Hey Qween!”
culture, Our Lady J has hope for a more diverse and accepting future. She states: “The world is beginning to see us as we’ve seen ourselves.”

Michael Musto, “Our Lady J Evolves, One Dolly Parton Cover at a Time.”
CONCLUSION

The experiences and careers of transgender vocalists and musicians like Laura Jane Grace, Lucas Silveira, and Our Lady J have been monumental both in the history of music and the ongoing rights movement surrounding transgender/genderqueer/gender nonconforming people. In this thesis, I have explored the work of these musicians, considering many musical facets such as vocal production and timbre, musical style, and lyrics, as well as a variety of cultural aspects, like visual presentation, media image, and musical cultural contexts. While these artists’ experiences have been vastly different due to their varied musical-social spheres, personal gender identities, and musical output, each of the three provide unique insight into a largely undiscussed musical world.

Laura Jane Grace, founder and lead singer of punk’s ever-popular Against Me!, decided to transition to living as a woman over a decade into her musical career. Despite concerns that Grace’s trademark rough, gritty shout might be lost in her transition, the singer has maintained her vocal sound, asserting that she sounds no less like a woman. As listeners may perceive a disjuncture between Grace’s traditionally masculine voice and female appearance, the singer challenges normative expectations of conventional femininity. Unlike Our Lady J and Lucas Silveira, who have both chosen to manipulate their voices—in Silveira’s case, to more comfortably fit his gender identity, and in Our Lady J’s case, to critique the sonic performance of
gender—Grace challenges the performative nature of gender as well as traditionally expected roles of femininity by maintaining her vocal integrity.

The feminine portrayal of Grace emphasized by production choices on *True Trans* contrasts starkly with both the range and timbre of her singing voice and recent live performance footage. This incongruence stems largely from Grace’s unique position in regard to the gender binary. Unlike Our Lady J, who melds together male and female characteristics, finding herself somewhere in between the two polarities (“a little bit of both”), Grace is both decidedly masculine and feminine. A closer look at the variance of masculine signifiers across rock genres might reveal more about Grace’s status as a trans woman in the “boy’s club” of punk music.

While the alternative rock “meat and potatoes” style of Nickelback may share traits of macho posturing with metal, or classic rock, or punk, accepted tropes of masculine authenticity are unique to each genre. Similarly complex, the reception of the “queer” and “other” has manifested differently in punk subgenres, and a close examination of the reception of *Transgender Dysphoria Blues* could vary greatly between circles like pop punk, queer punk, and *oi!*. Laura Jane Grace’s position as one of the most prominent music idols to date to come out and transition publicly has opened the eyes of the mainstream America to better understand transgender experiences through her works such as the concept album, *Transgender Dysphoria Blues*, as well as her internet series, *True Trans: With Laura Jane Grace*.

Lucas Silveira, solo singer-songwriter and front man of alternative rock band The Cliks, occupied a nonconforming, ambiguous gender identity for a number of years before eventually beginning testosterone hormone replacement therapy and identifying fully as male. In transition for many years, Silveira’s voice has slowly lowered in pitch and changed timbrally. The
publication of a series of YouTube cover song videos has allowed Silveira to document the subtle changes in his own voice over the course of his testosterone use. In the space of his YouTube channel, fans have created a community for dialogue about gender transition and vocal change through a network of comments.

A discussion of Silveira’s vocal transition unfortunately becomes limited by text alone. Despite the significant changes in timbre the singer experienced throughout hormone replacement therapy, his range only lowered slightly. To cite pitch or tessitura as one of the most significant markers of sonically understood gender is insufficient. Employing richly descriptive words in an attempt to articulate timbral changes better enhances an understanding of changing voices like Silveira’s (or ambiguous ones like Our Lady J’s), yet still falls short in fully conveying sound. To further enrich explorations of the aural, avenues not limited by language (spectrographs, for example) might be helpful in uncovering ways to communicate specific changes heard in voices like Silveira’s.

In being open about his previous gender nonconforming status and long-term transition, Lucas Silveira has helped to encourage dialogue about non-binary genders as well as vocal change through the physiological transitions catalyzed by hormone replacement therapy. His self-cataloguing of his changing voice over the course of YouTube cover song videos has provided an entirely unique resource for those interested in the transgender singing voice. As more studies on the effects of hormone replacement therapy emerge, experts will likely understand and be able to better predict voice change. For the time being, recordings like Silveira’s in conjunction with reports like Constansis’ (self-ethnography described in this
document’s introduction) help articulate the experiences of trans male singers taking testosterone.

Our Lady J appears as a hyper-feminized performer, inspired by the style of her idol Dolly Parton, yet identifies as somewhere in between male and female. Our Lady J’s recordings represent aspects of the singer’s own identity, exploring issues surrounding transgender identities and experiences through the songs’ lyrical narratives. Her live performance spectacle, “The Gospel of Dolly,” features a highly camped-up Our Lady J and her backing band and choir, performing a variety of Parton classics in Our Lady J’s gospel style.

Lovingly referring to herself as “tranny in a dress” and “sex-change cyborg,” Our Lady J embraces the in-between and unabashedly confronts the flaws of binary gender. Unlike Silveira and Grace, who have also both been publicly open about their transitions, Our Lady J continually intertwines her musical career with the transgender rights movement. The artist’s live “Gospel of Dolly” performances of camped-up, visual womanliness in addition to her auditory performances of stereotyped femininity in tracks like “Pink Prada Purse” prove Our Lady J’s intentions to reveal the performative nature of gender as well as mainstream society’s tightly controlled binary understanding of gender. Through her over-inflated, satirical performances, Our Lady J offers social commentary on hegemonic gender roles and expectations, employing drag performance as a tool for critique.

Although disparate in musical styles and individual experiences as transgender people, the artists discussed in this thesis have been equally influential in furthering dialogue pertaining to transgender journeys and rights. By openly discussing their experiences and views regarding their transitions, music, and intersections of the two, Laura Jane Grace, Lucas Silveira, and Our
Lady J have been among the first mainstream, popular musicians to come out and transition genders publicly in the middle of their musical careers. It is my hope that in having chosen to explore the careers of these three artists, I have provided a glimpse at the myriad possibilities for transgender/gender nonconforming vocalists. While Laura Jane Grace proves a point by maintaining vocal integrity, Our Lady J intentionally manipulates hers at times, both with the end goal of critiquing gender conventions and societal expectations. Lucas Silveira and Our Lady J have both occupied intentionally ambiguous gender identities, yet have approached their ambiguity entirely differently. Coming from three diverse musical backgrounds and scenes, each of these singers has helped to diversify their communities and have created safe spaces for fans to come together and express and experience diversity. Through the work I have done in this document, I hope to contribute fresh insights to the canon of ethno/musicology by suggesting new discussions relating to transgender and gender nonconforming identities, largely disregarded in the field until present day. I hope to expand these studies as more transgender musicians come out and offer their musical works and unique insights. The stories and musical outputs of Grace, Silveira, and Our Lady J have created a foundation upon which other artists can build, having paved the way for expression of alternative and multifaceted gender identities through their bodies of work and social activism and contributions.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Avery, Dan, “Our Lady J Finds Her Place at the Table with New Album, “Picture of a Man.””  


DISCOGRAPHY


Against Me!. *New Wave*. Sire Records, 2007. CD.

Against Me!. *Transgender Dysphoria Blues*. Total Treble Records, 2014. CD.


VIDEOGRAPHY


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kovDREyTIiFQ&list=UU6UdH4YqfUcdGUwCWc3rzoQ.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNaiRujz6SY&list=UU6UdH4YqfUcdGUwCWc3rzoQ.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9jf5FFbB6Rg&list=UU6UdH4YqfUcdGUwCWc3rzoQ.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUwfIvAgCmM&list=UU6UdH4YqfUcdGUwCWc3rzoQ.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9z_qXDOjXU&list=UU6UdH4YqfUcdGUwCWc3rzoQ.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hA5UedyKBpA.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nk7DHCZ_JA8&list=UU6UdH4YqfUcdGUwCWc3rzoQ.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1zUDcH_1uXY.