
Room for a Breast or Two

St. Vincent and the Post-Structural Feminism of "Friendly Instrument" Design

ABSTRACT This article uses textual and discourse analysis to examine how Annie Clark, who records and performs under the alias St. Vincent, problematized the electric guitar's gendered address by designing a Signature Collection for Music Man, a subsidiary of equipment manufacturer Ernie Ball. It first contextualizes the industrial efforts to make the electric guitar more accessible to girls during Clark's adolescence and their limitations. It then analyzes Clark's promotional strategies for the collection. Most branding opportunities available to female music industry professionals interested in extending their commercial shelf life often affirm conventionally feminine modes of creative self-expression, such as fashion and cosmetics. Clark's guitar challenges such gender essentialism by highlighting her own virtuosity as a queer musician, songwriter, and producer while giving players a different set of tools with which to create new sounds. **KEYWORDS** St. Vincent, rock culture, electric guitar, branding, gender, feminism, technology

Musician Annie Clark, who performs under the alias St. Vincent, graced the cover of *Guitar World's* Preview Issue in February 2017. Her presence alone warranted attention. *Guitar World*, a monthly U.S. magazine for guitarists and bassists, first hit newsstands in July 1980 with a candid shot of blues guitarist Johnny Winter and historically over-represents male musicians as cover subjects in its four-decade run. Chrissie Hynde was the first woman to appear on the cover in March 1981.¹ The image, a close-up of the Pretenders' frontwoman in concert, was also a bit of noteworthy staging. Though *Guitar World* occasionally uses action shots to create dynamic and immersive tableaux, all of the magazine's subsequent cover girls were captured in portrait. Furthermore, Hynde remained the only female artist to appear on a *Guitar World* cover until it ran a feature on Hole in January 1999.² Orianthi and Joan Jett's portraits ran in April 2013³ and May 2015.⁴ This made Clark *Guitar World's* fifth female musician cover subject.

Clark's professional designation is significant, because *Guitar World* regularly employed beautiful women to bolster male cover subjects' virility and cater to a presumed

1. *Guitar World* 2, no. 2 (March 1981).

2. *Guitar World* 19, no. 1 (January 1999).

3. *Guitar World* 34, no. 4 (April 2013).

4. *Guitar World* 36, no. 7 (May 2015).

heteromale readership. For the March 1994 cover, ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons shared the frame with girlfriend Gillian Stillwater, who wore a sequined bra and fringed mini-skirt and plucked the nickel-plated National Style I Tricone slung across her partner's hips. Such representational strategies often reinforced the advertisements inside the magazine, as *Guitar World* received support from equipment companies that used glamour modeling to sell lurid fantasies of backstage debauchery to their gearhead clientele. In 2003, *Guitar World* rebranded the Buyer's Guide, an annual feature since 1985, by patterning it after *Sports Illustrated's* Swimsuit Issue and featuring pin-up models with branded merchandise. As the first Buyer's Guide Girl, porn star Jenna Jameson flanked a cherry-red Gibson Firebird in a pair of leather hot pants for the cover.⁵

Clark was the first woman to appear on the cover since model Karla Lee posed for the 2016 Buyer's Guide in April. While that issue boasted "More Brands and Models Than Any Other Guide!" and featured a bevy of tattooed pin-ups,⁶ publishing executive Bill Amstutz announced that subsequent gear guides would not use glamour models as a response to the magazine's lagging circulation. Amstutz claimed that *Guitar World's* parent company, NewBay Media LLC, did not want readers to associate the magazine with sexist imagery that misrepresented female guitarists, because "the number of women players is growing and we want to support them."⁷ One player who may have felt misrepresented was Clark, who Googled the magazine after agreeing to be profiled and found pages of buxom white women mounting electric guitars in bikinis and lingerie. Clark mocked the magazine's propensity to feature women who, in her words, looked like "they've never held a guitar before" by posing in an oversized t-shirt with an airbrushed bikini body while confidently wielding an electric guitar.⁸

But Clark's cover photo was not just a sly critique of the magazine's tendency to objectify women at the expense of showcasing their musical skills. The St. Vincent Signature Series guitar in Polaris White draped across her torso was also product placement. In 2015, Clark began developing a signature guitar collection with Ernie Ball's subsidiary, Music Man. This partnership is significant for an industry that often marginalizes female instrumentalists' talent. It was the company's first collaboration with a female performer since its founding in 1974. Furthermore, Clark is one of a few women to design an electric guitar for mass production since the instrument's invention in the early 1930s. But Clark, whose work frequently examines gender and sexuality's social construction, also used instrument design to critique rock culture's entrenched gender essentialism by creating "friendly" instruments for small-bodied feminine and gender non-conforming musicians.⁹ The St. Vincent guitar's lightweight, asymmetrical body challenged the electric guitar's symbolic objectification of the female form *and* specialty manufacturers' use of girly aesthetics to market to young women. When she announced her line on Instagram in

5. *Guitar World* 23, no. 13 (December 2003).

6. *Guitar World* 36, no. 12 (November 2015).

7. Chris McMahon, "Guitar World Publisher Announces End of 'Swimsuit Edition' Gear Guides," *Reverb*, 31 March 2016, <https://reverb.com/news/guitar-world-publisher-announces-end-of-swimsuit-edition-gear-guides>.

8. Brad Angle, "March of the Saint," *Guitar World* 38, no. 2 (February 2017): 42–52.

9. Angle, "March of the Saint," 52.

August 2015, Clark described the guitar, which weighs approximately seven pounds, as “ergonomic*,” which meant that “[t]here is room for a breast. Or two.”¹⁰

This article uses textual and discourse analysis to examine how Clark mobilized her partnership with an equipment manufacturer to problematize the electric guitar’s gendered address. First, it contextualizes certain industrial efforts to make the electric guitar more accessible to girls during Clark’s adolescence and their limitations. Clark came of age after the riot grrrl movement and witnessed female instrumentalists’ increased visibility through the formation of gear companies like Daisy Rock Guitar and music literacy programs, such as the Rock and Roll Camp for Girls. Next, it analyzes Clark’s promotional strategies for the collection. Most branding opportunities available to female music industry professionals often affirm conventionally feminine modes of creative self-expression. Clark’s guitar challenges such gender essentialism by highlighting her virtuosity as a queer femme songwriter, producer, and instrumentalist while giving players a different set of tools with which to create new sounds.

TUNING UP

The St. Vincent Signature Collection for Music Man advances a post-structural feminist critique of rock’s gender politics by problematizing the instrument’s symbolic associations with female objectification and re-centering the needs of players with “a breast or two” to challenge rock culture’s reproduction of hegemonic masculinity. Clark’s design and branding decisions demonstrate how the electric guitar functions as a technology of gender, Teresa de Lauretis’s term to describe the various cultural practices that mark the body as masculine or feminine through symbolic language. De Lauretis posits that “gender is not a property of bodies or something originally existing in human beings” but should instead be considered as the “effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations.”¹¹ Like many feminist scholars responding to Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” de Lauretis examined classic Hollywood cinema’s facilitation of the male gaze through narrative, technologies, and spectatorship.¹² But as the camera facilitates cinema’s tacit phallogentrism, so does the electric guitar for rock music.

In 1995, the documentary series *The History of Rock ‘n’ Roll* devoted an episode to the electric guitar. It included no women but featured an extended sequence of male musicians discussing the electric guitar’s function as a boyhood transitional object, its resemblance to feminine curvature, its ability to mimic and accompany the human voice, and the erotic power they felt while wielding it. KISS rhythm guitarist Paul Stanley surmised that the electric guitar was rock’s primary instrument “because it’s an extension of what you’ve got between your legs.”¹³ While discussing Jimi Hendrix’s erotic potency in his cultural history

10. @st_vincent, “It is with pride that I present the St. Vincent Signature @ernieball MusicMan Guitar,” *Instagram*, 27 August 2015, https://www.instagram.com/p/65ZIEpQTfo/?utm_source=ig_embed.

11. Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 3.

12. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.

13. *The History of Rock and Roll*, “Guitar Heroes,” directed by Andrew Solt (New York City: Time-Life, 1995).

of the electric guitar, Steve Waksman uses the term “technophallus” to describe how the instrument serves as “an electronic appendage” that extends from a player’s body.¹⁴ Though Waksman contextualizes Hendrix within rock music’s racist fetishes for Black heteromasculinity and notes the musician’s ambivalence about being watched by predominantly white rock critics and fans,¹⁵ he claims that the electric guitar helped Hendrix “transcend human potential in both musical and sexual terms. The dimension of exaggerated phallic display was complemented by the array of new sonic possibilities offered by the instrument, possibilities he deployed with aggressive creativity.”¹⁶

While Waksman’s concept can apply to female players, Stanley’s and his colleagues’ comments assume that all players are driven by the same physiological and artistic desires. These impulses may not align with Clark’s interests as a classically trained musician, a queer woman, and a conceptual performer who once declared, “I don’t love it when the guitar sounds like a guitar.”¹⁷ Clark grew up after synthesizers and digital technologies helped redefine rock instrumentation during the 1980s, a development met with determinist critique and homophobic resistance from many white male rock journalists, musicians, and fans who feared that musicians’ adoption of electronic instruments would result in automation, amateurism, and disco’s encroachment.¹⁸ As a songwriter and composer, Clark often challenges romantic notions about musicians’ intimate proximity to analog instruments by playing to pre-recorded backing tracks and using digital interface programs like MIDI to write her guitar parts. Her embrace of electronic equipment aligns her more closely with electronic instrumentalists. In her book on women’s work as composers and DJs, Tara Rodgers argues that her subjects, many of whom are queer or gender non-conforming, work outside of rock’s paradigms in order to examine “structures of time and space, or voice and language; to challenge distinctions of nature and culture using sound and audio technologies; to question the norms of technological practice; and to balance their needs for productive solitude with collaboration and community.”¹⁹

Clark also grew up with Sleater-Kinney, a queer feminist punk power trio guided by singer-guitarists Carrie Brownstein and Corin Tucker’s communicative approach to composition. Both women often write independent melodic lines instead of harmonic or rhythmic accompaniment to create songs that sound like open-ended conversations instead of monologues. Sasha Geffen also identifies dialogism as a hallmark of St. Vincent’s work. Clark often treats her guitar as a duet partner by mimicking its tone and singing with it instead of over it. As a result, Clark’s guitar “is not an appendage, not

14. Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 188.

15. Waksman, *Instruments of Desire*, 205.

16. Waksman, *Instruments of Desire*, 188.

17. Nick Paumgarten, “St. Vincent’s Cheeky, Sexy Rock,” *New Yorker*, 21 August 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/08/28/st-vincents-cheeky-sexy-rock>.

18. Theo Cateforis, *Are We Not New Wave? Modern Pop at the Turn of the 1980s* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 151–81.

19. Tara Rodgers, *Pink Noises: Women on Electronic Music and Sound* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 5.

a phallus, not an extension of the body. It is its own body with its own voice. By thinking of her guitar as a peer and not a tool, Clark frees her own voice to take on new textures and movements.”²⁰ Finally, Clark’s skills as a musician have developed by negotiating with an instrument that Mavis Bayton claims “was designed for men, by men” and “functioned to exclude women,” while her instrument modifications affirm Bayton’s prediction that if more women picked up the electric guitar, perhaps equipment designers would “make allowances for the fact that women have breasts.”²¹

Yet Clark was unwilling to have gendered assumptions about girlhood limit her capacity as a player, in part because her relationship to the electric guitar was shaped by difference. She first encountered the instrument as a child during a family screening of *La Bamba*, the 1987 biopic about Chicano rock pioneer Ritchie Valens, and began sketching guitars and building instruments out of cardboard boxes and rubber bands.²² It is worth noting that the electric guitar captured Clark’s imagination instead of the bass, a rock instrument that Mary Ann Clawson argues is foisted upon female players because it is perceived as easier to play and rarely carries the melody as part of the rhythm section.²³ Clark also benefitted from family members’ recognition that the electric guitar captured her imagination. By junior high, Clark’s mother bought her daughter her first guitar.²⁴ Clark’s aunt and uncle, Patti and Tuck Andress, nurtured her talent and ambition by enrolling her in guitar lessons and hiring her as a roadie for their jazz combo Tuck & Patti.²⁵ As a teenager, Clark witnessed their operation as a mixed-gender, interracial group led by her aunt, the lead singer and a Black woman. Furthermore, as a teenager growing up in the Dallas suburbs during the mid-1990s, Clark spent hours in her bedroom playing with the radio to classic rock staples like Led Zeppelin, contemporary grunge bands like Nirvana, and local metalheads like Pantera. She workshopped “Smells Like Teen Spirit” during her lessons and chased the thrill of “mak[ing] the sound like my heroes made” while developing a guitar sound informed by, yet apart from, her male role models’ musical approach.²⁶

But Clark’s adolescence was also defined by white women’s efforts to prioritize feminine cultural expression and audience formation within rock culture. Clark came of age after riot grrrl, a feminist musical movement typified by confessional songwriting that critiqued patriarchy’s abuse of young women with “girls to the front” crowd-control policies and all-ages booking practices that challenged punk’s entrenched misogyny and

20. Sasha Geffen, “St. Vincent Is The 21st Century’s Guitar Vanguard,” *NPR*, 20 August 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/20/638896447/st-vincent-is-the-21st-century-s-guitar-vanguard>.

21. Mavis Bayton, “Women and the Electric Guitar,” in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (New York: Routledge, 1997), 45–46.

22. “The Making of St. Vincent’s Ernie Ball Music Man Signature Guitar,” *Ernie Ball*, 20 January 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=5M5qpaQ1h9o.

23. Mary Ann Clawson, “When Women Play the Bass: Instrument Specialization and Gender Interpretation in Alternative Rock Music,” *Gender and Society* 13, no. 2 (April 1999): 193–210.

24. “Making of,” *Ernie Ball*.

25. Melena Ryzik, “Friendly, and Just a Bit Creepy: St. Vincent Defies Categories,” *New York Times*, 6 May 2009. <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/07/arts/music/07vince.html>.

26. “Making of,” *Ernie Ball*.

connected punk to lesbian and radical feminist musical traditions.²⁷ Bayton claims that riot grrrl challenged the music business's marginalization of female instrumentalists and its emphasis on female singers' image over their technical competence.²⁸ Many riot grrrl associates bristled at the music press and recording industry's efforts to commodify the movement through trend pieces and major label contracts and launched a media black-out.²⁹ Despite participants' best efforts to pry riot grrrl from capitalism's machinery, mainstream alternative rock exploited the emergence of telegenic performers like Courtney Love and Alanis Morissette,³⁰ utopian festivals like Sarah McLachlan's Lilith Fair, and specialty equipment companies like Daisy Rock Guitar. Clark was an ambivalent bystander to these developments. In particular, she felt condescended to by companies like Daisy Rock, which makes instruments in girly colors and shapes for a largely pre-pubescent consumer base, and scoffed at the prospect of "trying to work out Pantera riffs" on a pink, flower-shaped guitar.³¹ Clark's frustrations align with other feminist scholars' critiques of media production equipment that disciplines and limits girls and women's creative capacities. Mary Celeste Kearney describes media-making equipment like Daisy Rock Guitars as "pink technologies," whose design specifications and affordances reveal "the larger matrixes of power in which such technologies, their designers, and their users are differently situated."³² Kearney, however, has a more charitable view of Daisy Rock than Clark. She applauds the company's involvement with Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls and the Girls Rock Camp Alliance, an international music literacy program and resource network for girl musicians inspired by the riot grrrl movement, as a sponsor and benefactor. She also recognizes Daisy Rock's efforts to develop separate lines for older players, an expansion that occurred after Clark graduated high school and studied classical guitar at Boston's Berklee College of Music. Nonetheless, both Clark and Kearney are concerned about technologies' capacities to allow and encourage players' transformative use.

Thus, if the electric guitar operates as a technology of gender that Clark problematized by centering the needs of different players through "friendly" design, attention should also be paid to the instrument's affordances, or the social capabilities technologies enable by user interaction. According to Nancy Baym, technologies have certain logics that influence but do not determine their use.³³ Baym, an adherent to the social shaping of technology perspective that posits a constitutive relationship between users and tools, believes that technologies' use value is shaped within a range of engagement that

27. Mary Celeste Kearney, "The Missing Links: Riot Grrrl – Feminism – Lesbian Culture," in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (New York: Routledge, 1997), 202–29.

28. Mavis Bayton, *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 63–80.

29. Sara Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

30. Kristen Schilt, "'A Little Too Ironic': The Appropriation and Packaging of Riot Grrrl Politics by Mainstream Female Musicians," *Popular Music and Society* 26, no. 1 (2003): 5–16.

31. Mary H.K. Choi, "St. Vincent's Signature Guitars." *VICE News Tonight*. 21 March 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HF7-7RLwCDE>.

32. Mary Celeste Kearney, "Pink Technology: Mediamaking Gear for Girls." *Camera Obscura* 25, no. 2.74 (2010): 7.

33. Nancy Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (New York: Polity, 2010).

encompasses both a tool's intended functions and users' discovery of unexpected applications and modifications.³⁴ Such an outlook allows room for scholars to consider the importance of performance and play to music technologies and their relationship to gender. Building on Judith Butler's claim that gender performativity is "a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed,"³⁵ Christopher Small used "musicking," or the capacities to participate "in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing), or by dancing," to highlight music production's processual, unfixed nature.³⁶ Musicking as a cultural practice enacted by both musicians and consumers who divine their own sounds from branded gear also corresponds with Kiri Miller's assertion that "playing along" is an integral part of gameplay and amateur musicianship in the digital age that "bridge time and space" by "creating connections between dispersed and diverse individual human experiences."³⁷ Finally, as Miriam Bratu Hansen argues, "play" is a polysemic term assigned to toys and games, audience interactivity, and gambling.³⁸ Clark's brand partnership with Music Man provides fans with gear that emblemizes her affective bond with fans and future players, allows them to engage audition alongside other senses like touch, and minimizes financial risk while extending her commercial output beyond her recorded catalogue and promotional tours.

In particular, the St. Vincent Signature Series addresses Kearney's critique of electric guitars' inaccessibility for some players because "their necks are too thick, scales too long, and bodies too large and heavy for most female (and some males) to use comfortably."³⁹ The St. Vincent's narrow, lightweight body; tapered neck; and additional frets near the chassis facilitate ease of use for small-bodied players and illustrate what Lucas Hilderbrand refers to as an "aesthetics of access," or technologies' formal principles that document and illustrate their use.⁴⁰ Hilderbrand applies this concept to a rich cultural history of analog videotape and bootlegging, a format and audience practice shaped by degradation that embeds user engagement into copied and pirated texts through static and image warping. He also takes great care to demonstrate how such documentation is meaningful to marginalized audiences, such as the queer communities who illegally copied and recirculated Todd Haynes' 1987 experimental biopic *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* and the networks of girls and queer youth who participated in Miranda July's Joanie 4 Jackie video chain letters during the 1990s.⁴¹ To be clear, Clark's aesthetics of access very much adheres to the dictates of copyright law. The guitar's design is a modification of the Albert

34. Baym, *Personal Connections*, 22–49.

35. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 34.

36. Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 9.

37. Kiri Miller, *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4–5.

38. Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema," *October* 109 (2004): 3–45.

39. Kearney, "Pink Technology," 19.

40. Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

41. Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice*, 161–90; 195–223.

Lee, a Music Man model whose specifications are owned by its parent company, Ernie Ball. Furthermore, the collection's aesthetics of access do not apply to price point. A new St. Vincent guitar costs \$2,000-\$3,000 and \$400-\$1,000 through the resale market. The brand is considerably more expensive than Daisy Rock's products, which the company prices at \$50-\$500, in part because Music Man builds the St. Vincent guitar from more expensive and durable materials, such as African mahogany, steel, and maple. It also remains to be seen whether Music Man's St. Vincent collection will create opportunities for future generations of musicians and designers to address the distinct needs of performers who do not or cannot align with Clark as a white, femme, cisgender, and able-bodied woman. Nonetheless, Clark and Music Man's commitment to "friendly" design reinforces how technological affordances are negotiated through users' negotiation with aesthetics and functionality.

TAKING THE STAGE

Though this article examines how Annie Clark partnered with a gear manufacturer to create her own branded guitar, decoration and modification have always been important aspects of musicians' creative expression. In 1943, folk singer Woody Guthrie adorned his Gibson L-00 with a sign proclaiming "This machine kills fascists" to protest Germany's Nazi regime.⁴² Blues guitarist Buddy Guy commissioned Fender to design a polka-dotted Stratocaster to commemorate his mother, who died of a stroke before he could buy the dappled Cadillac he promised her after he landed a well-paying job.⁴³ Rock subcultures like punk, new wave, and grunge helped mainstream guitar decoration during the 1980s and 1990s as bands began distinguishing themselves from their peers or showing support for other groups with stickers as well as hand-made images, phrases, and carvings. For example, when Green Day made their mid-90s ascent to Buzz Bin superstars with their breakthrough album, *Dookie*, front man Billie Joe Armstrong's embellished cyan Stratocaster, nicknamed "Blue," was a fixture in their music videos and concerts.⁴⁴ He also adorned it with stickers to promote lesser-known peers like Pansy Division, a queercore band who opened for Green Day during their 1994 tour. It was also a canvas for punk graffiti. The letters "BJ" appeared in torn red tape near the pick-up, initials that the lead singer shared with the slang term for fellatio.

Riot grrrl was also quite savvy at synthesizing previous subcultural movements' stylistic gestures in order to critique women and girls' subjugation. Many folks associated with the movement reclaimed accessories of white, post-war, U.S. girlhood like barrettes, Mary

42. Anne E. Neimark, *There Ain't Nobody That Can Sing Like Me: The Life of Woody Guthrie* (New York: Atheneum Books, 2002).

43. Alan di Perna, "Buddy Guy Talks Muddy Waters, Fender Strats, and Touring with the Stones," *Guitar World*, 30 July 2015. <https://www.guitarworld.com/features/dear-guitar-hero-buddy-guy-discusses-muddy-waters-fender-strats-touring-rolling-stones-and-more>.

44. David Fricke, "Dookie at 20: Billie Joe Armstrong on Green Day's Punk Blockbuster," *Rolling Stone*, 3 February 2014. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/dookie-at-20-billie-joe-armstrong-on-green-days-punk-blockbuster-241694/>.

Janes, lunch boxes, and slip dresses.⁴⁵ Riot grrrl's childlike aesthetic borrowed from indie-pop bands like Beat Happening, a mixed-gender trio from Olympia, Washington, who wore threadbare cardigans they excavated from local thrift stores as a metonym for their deceptively simple music and an alternative to hardcore's toxic masculinity.⁴⁶ And while riot grrrl eventually was reduced to a uniform and many female-fronted, feminist-identified rock bands like L7, Babes in Toyland, and Hole were incorrectly lumped in with the movement, some musicians were inspired by its feminist appeals to women's creative autonomy and critical reclamation of girly femininity. One figure was Sonic Youth bassist Kim Gordon, who launched her X-Girl clothing line after the band signed a major-label contract with DGC. Another figure was designer Wendy Mullin, who Gordon hired as X-Girl's pattern maker. The native Chicagoan stumbled on a potential career path after college when a roommate brought a guitar home and Mullin embellished its strap. Sensing players' desire for flair, Mullin began constructing straps from leftover bits of neon, pastel, and metallic vinyl, reinforcing them with breathable nylon webbing, and decorating them with images of starlets, supernatural and mythological creatures, and symbols like hearts and stars. When she relocated to New York City in 1991 to launch her brand, Built by Wendy, she began selling the straps at a record store on Prince Street. Early customers included Thurston Moore, Gordon's bandmate and then-husband,⁴⁷ and Hole's bassist Melissa Auf der Maur.⁴⁸ Soon, Mullin's guitar straps were all over MTV, music magazines, and promotional photos.

One thing that was notable about Built by Wendy's guitar straps was how they drew attention to themselves. Guitar straps are primarily utilitarian. They stabilize an instrument to a player's body and facilitate a wide range of motion during performance. They can also be adjusted to accommodate specific musicians' physicality and performance styles, as some wear their instruments across their chests while others slide them past their hips. These preferences are often legible through players' posture, as guitar straps are typically made from leather or mesh and rendered in dark or neutral colors so as to not pull focus from the player. Therefore, the popularity of Built by Wendy guitar straps during alternative rock's heyday helped challenge rock's hegemonic masculinity by accessorizing players' virtuosity with feminine glamour and spotlighting female performers' musicianship.

Hole in particular used Built by Wendy's girly aesthetic to highlight their songs' thematic excavations of female performance at the height of their fame. They featured Mullin's straps in several music videos, starting with "Violet," *Live Through This's* third single, in January 1995, which prominently featured them as a design element. Directed

45. Gayle Wald, "Just a Girl? Rock Music, Feminism, and the Cultural Construction of Female Youth," in *Rock Over the Edge: Transformations in Popular Music Culture*, ed. Roger Beebe, Denise Fulbrook, and Ben Saunders (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 191–215.

46. Michael Azerrad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground 1981–1991* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2002), 454–92.

47. Elizabeth Thompson and Alexis Swerdloff, "An Oral History of X-Girl," *Paper*, 20 August 2012, <http://www.papermag.com/an-oral-history-of-x-girl-1426244090.html>.

48. [1] Gia Kourlas, "Alternative Shoulder Chic," *New York Times*, 26 February 1995, <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/02/26/style/noticed-alternative-shoulder-chic.html>.

by Mark Seliger and Fred Woodward, “Violet” scrutinizes the contradictory expectations placed on female entertainers through juxtaposition in order to visualize the song’s examination of sexual degradation. Inspired by Love’s fondness for vintage pornography, the video was shot on 16mm and filters child ballerinas and beauty pageant contestants and adult strippers and nude models through the male gaze’s virgin-whore binary by warping girlhood interests into prostitution. Furthermore, these tableaux of feminine creativity are staged before grotesque, foreboding audiences of leering men that poignantly connect burlesque to rock stardom by showing Love’s molestation while body surfing through a mosh pit during the song’s climax. This scene was inspired by Love’s assault by several male attendees while stage-diving during a Hole concert in Glasgow during their 1991 tour.⁴⁹ The video’s antiquated *mise-en-scène* and cynical message is complicated by the presence of Mullin’s guitar straps during the band’s performance footage. In these segments, Love is foregrounded in medium close-up and framed by Auf der Maur and lead guitarist Eric Erlandson. The trio hold up their green Fender Squire, burgundy Fender Precision Bass, and silver Veleno with Built by Wendy straps flecked with soft silver accents that complement the video’s faded palette and grainy film stock. The image suggests a united front, while Love’s bubble gum pink strap pulls focus from her band mates’ moss green straps.

“Violet” illustrates Love’s brand loyalty in another important way. In 1997, she developed the Vista Venus for Fender. There have only been a few female musicians to design their own signature guitars. Heart’s lead guitarist Nancy Wilson has commissioned multiple companies to produce custom equipment for her, including her cerulean Lake Placid Fender Telecaster and her Martin HD-35 acoustic guitar.⁵⁰ Gibson has designed two guitars for Joan Jett, the Melody Maker in 2001 and the ES 339 in 2019, both of which were released as limited-edition collectors’ models.⁵¹ The first woman to design her own signature guitar was Bonnie Raitt, whose Signature Series Stratocaster for Fender arrived in the spring of 1995. These collections were part of guitar companies’ broader efforts during the decade to attract female players. In 1994, acoustic guitar manufacturer C. F. Martin & Company responded to a sales dip by developing a new model for women and hiring several female guitarists as consultants. When asked to offer feedback on their dreadnought guitar, a foundational model with a 16-inch-wide chassis that dated back to 1915 and was named after a Royal Navy battleship, instrumentalists like folk artist Diane Ponzio surmised that “[i]f you have appreciable breasts, it’s just uncomfortable to play.”⁵² In January 1995, Martin introduced the Double-O, a limited-edition model with a smaller body, thinner fingerboard, and narrower neck that borrowed from nineteenth-century instrument dimensions, an era when the average acoustic guitar was 11 inches wide and a white middle-class female consumer base

49. Kim France, “Feminism, Amplified,” *New York Magazine* 29, no. 22 (1996): 41.

50. Will Kelly, “Nancy Wilson: Fire in the Heart,” *Vintage Guitar*, 1 October 2011, <https://www.vintageguitar.com/11728/nancy-wilson/>.

51. “Joan Jett Gibson Signature ES 339,” *Gibson Guitar*, 21 June 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4BX1y2GBHY>.

52. Thom Geier, “Girls with Guitars That Fit Just Right.” *U.S. News & World Report* 122, no. 9 (1997): 65.

composed of matriarchs and music teachers drove the market. It debuted at an industry conference and sold out within two days.⁵³

But Raitt's model was the first guitar to be designed by a woman since Fender's founding in 1946. It was patterned after the 1960 Stratocaster, an integral part of Raitt's arsenal since she began gigging in the early '70s as part of Mississippi Fred McDowell's backing band and opening for John Hammond at Greenwich Village's historic Gaslight Café. The Raitt Signature Series Stratocaster was manufactured in two colors, the orange Three-Color Sunburst and the blue Desert Sunset, each with a sunburst finish rendered in Raitt's favorite colors, turquoise and purple.⁵⁴ In addition to these personal touches, Raitt's Fender had a rosewood fretboard with a 1 9/16th neck width that was narrower than the company's other models in order to attract women and small-handed players.⁵⁵ Such inclusive design decisions reinforced the guitar's primary function as a philanthropic tool to empower young women. According to Raitt, Fender originally pitched the idea to her as a way "to encourage women buyers . . . I wasn't interested in helping them to hawk their product, but we could work together if we put the profits towards providing free guitars and music lessons for underprivileged kids."⁵⁶

At the time, a Raitt Stratocaster cost \$1,500. Raitt donated her guitar sales' royalties to charities like the Boys and Girls Club of America in exchange for Fender providing instruments and financing instructors' salaries for afterschool music literacy programs.⁵⁷ Raitt's Stratocaster was part of the singer-songwriter's broader philanthropic efforts throughout the early 1990s, a renaissance period for the journeywoman performer who experienced a career renaissance with her tenth album, 1989's *Nick of Time*, which Capitol released a few months before her fortieth birthday and which sold five million copies and garnered her an Album of the Year Grammy. It was also during this time that Raitt founded the Rhythm and Blues Foundation, a non-profit that helped cover elderly black musicians' medical expenses and advocated for royalties compensation from racist executives.⁵⁸ Raitt and Fender launched the Bonnie Raitt Guitar Project by staging a benefit concert and silent auction at the 1995 North American Music Merchants expo that auctioned signed musical equipment from Buddy Guy, Eric Clapton, and Bob Dylan and raised \$80,000 for the charity.⁵⁹ Four years after its market debut, sales from the Raitt Stratocaster funded 100 youth clubs and 2,000 music students, most of whom were girls. But by 2002, Fender had discontinued the model as a collector's item.

Thirteen years later, a representative from Ernie Ball approached Clark about designing a signature guitar line for Music Man while she was touring to support *Love This*

53. Geier, "Girls with Guitars."

54. "Fender & Raitt Team Up on Raitt Project," *Music Trades* 143, no. 2 (1995): 182.

55. Geier, "Girls with Guitars."

56. Nigel Williamson, "Bonnie Gets the Blues," *The Times* 122, no. 9 (1998): 65.

57. "Fender & Raitt Team Up," *Music Trades*, 182.

58. Kimina Lyall and Bill Leak, "Undisguised Raitt Arrives in the Nick of Time," *The Australian* (3 December 1996): 010.

59. "Fender & Raitt Team Up," *Music Trades*, 182.

Giant, her 2012 album with David Byrne.⁶⁰ The company perceived her as a good brand ambassador because of her affinity for and proficiency with the Albert Lee, a model that the English guitarist designed with the company in 1993 that built upon the features of its Axis guitar, which she had played exclusively during that tour. Earlier in her career, Clark toggled among the Lee, the Silvertone 1488, and the Harmony H15 Bobkat, in part, for comfort. As she explained to *Premier Guitar* in 2011, “I’m a pretty small person and, even though I love the sustain of a Les Paul, three songs into a set, my back hurts because it’s too heavy. I know that was the thing in the ‘70s—the heavier the guitar, the longer the sustain—but I just can’t do that.”⁶¹ She was also drawn to the 1488 and the Bobkat’s vibrato bar, noting that both models could withstand a lot of attack from players while staying in tune, which minimized her need to retune between songs on stage.

Yet Clark also noted that the 1488 and the Bobkat’s necks were “not the most hospitable” for her as a small-handed player⁶² and turned to the Albert Lee for the *Love This Giant* tour because the narrow rosewood neck’s smooth finish made it easier for her to wrap her left hand around it without cramping up.⁶³ Ball was interested in capitalizing on Clark’s brand loyalty while reinvigorating interest in its Music Man signature series, a line of branded guitars produced periodically since the mid-1980s to help with sales and distinguish themselves by larger competitors like Fender and Gibson. Lee’s Signature guitar was part of the collection, along with models designed by Eddie Van Halen, Deep Purple’s Steve Morse, Dream Theater founder John Petrucci, and Toto leader Steve Lukather. Since Ernie Ball’s acquisition of Music Man in 1984, the subsidiary had never commissioned a female guitarist to design for them. Such a business strategy could help the company serve a new generation of girl- and woman-identified guitarists who matriculated through feminist-identified and equality-oriented music literacy programs like Girls Rock Camp. It would also allow them to cater to the readership and subjects of *She Shreds*, a Portland-based music magazine for female-identified guitarists and bassists that receives sponsorship from Ernie Ball. By fall 2018, Fender released in-house survey findings that revealed that fifty percent of their new customers within the past five years were women.⁶⁴ Thus, Clark’s recruitment allowed Music Man to build upon its reputation as a producer of “player” guitars and basses beloved by reputable musicians while also updating the collection to include women and possibly attract female buyers. After the tour wrapped in September 2013, Clark designed the guitar prototype while working on her eponymous fourth album.

Clark’s interest in creating her own guitar collection should be interpreted within the broader scope of her considerable professional ambition. Music Man solicited Clark

60. “Annie Clark Talks About the Music Man St. Vincent Signature at the NAMM Show 2016,” *Reverb*, 21 January 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=1&v=cL-zzILaEnY.

61. Steve Hammond, “St. Vincent: All-Star Dropout,” *Premier Guitar*, 18 October 2011. https://www.premierguitar.com/articles/St_Vincent_All_Star_Dropout.

62. Hammond, “All-Star Dropout.”

63. *Reverb*, “Annie Clark Talks.”

64. Nicole Engelman, “Fender Study Reveals 50% of New Guitar Players Are Women,” *Billboard*, 17 October 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/business/8480495/fender-study-new-guitar-players-women>.

during a transitional moment in her career. *Love This Giant* was a collaborative effort with an established musical talent. It was also Clark's last project with 4AD, the influential British art-rock label that launched the careers of alternative groups like the Cocteau Twins, the Pixies, the Breeders, Throwing Muses, and Lush and reinvented itself in the early 2010s by showcasing inventive female artists like Clark, Grimes, Tune-Yards, and Torres. Clark made three albums for the label between 2009 and 2012 that established her as a breakout talent. She scaffolded her professional reputation by licensing several pieces from her catalogue to television programs, advertisements, and films, including two songs she wrote specifically for the *Twilight* franchise. Yet she perceived that her contract with 4AD was limiting and that the label's reputation overshadowed her aspirations. In 2013, she signed with Loma Vista and Republic Records and started work on her eponymous fifth album, an intentionally brighter effort than the "emotionally fraught" *Strange Mercy*, her last solo effort for 4AD that was inspired by her father's insider trading arrest.⁶⁵ The album explored the power of iconicity, and singles like "Digital Witness" helped *St. Vincent* catapult to the top of several year-end lists, move more units than her previous releases, and net a Grammy for 2015's Best Alternative Music Album. Its thematic concern with symbolic power was visualized by Renata Raksha's cover photo of grey-haired Clark seated on a pink throne in a sequined gown. The image was inspired by Alejandro Jodorowsky's *Holy Mountain* and became the centerpiece for the 2014-2015 Digital Witness tour. This was Clark's most ambitious outing to date, a stage show that now included choreography, moving set pieces, and multiple costumes. She promoted the production as the final musical guest for *Saturday Night Live*'s 2013-2014 season and performed a cover of "Lithium" as part of an all-female tribute medley for Nirvana's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction. She also parlayed her talents into other musical television appearances by recording a cover of "Bad Girls" for the *Bob's Burgers* soundtrack and appearing in an animated video with Tina Belcher; making cameo appearances on *Portlandia*, Carrie Brownstein and Fred Armisen's observational sketch comedy show about hipster culture for IFC; and filling in for Armisen as *Late Night with Seth Meyers*' bandleader.

During *St. Vincent*'s promotional cycle, which coincided with Clark's Music Man signing, she also branched out into music merchandising by partnering with Intelligientia on her own branded coffee and signing endorsement deals with Sonos and Apple in 2015. Two years later, following the success of her fifth album and her growing portfolio, she became a spokesmodel for Tiffany and Co. and recorded a cover of the Beatles' "All You Need Is Love" for its digital campaign. Therefore, Clark's foray into instrument design was part of her broader musical ambitions. But while she intended to make a guitar that fit her unique needs as a performer, the *St. Vincent* was not necessarily a guitar *for* women. As she explained to a representative from Guitar Center during her first expo at the North American Music Merchants in 2016, she wanted to build an "ergonomic" and "gender-neutral guitar" light enough to accommodate her lithe frame and a grueling

65. Jonah Weiner, "The Dream World of St. Vincent," *Rolling Stone*, 23 June 2014. <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/the-dream-world-of-st-vincent-101044/>.

tour schedule that averaged 200 concerts a year.⁶⁶ She also wanted a guitar that was equally comfortable for players who were standing or seated,⁶⁷ a versatile frame she desired as a dynamic live performer who also spent large portions of her work time in the studio as a prolific recording artist, session musician, and producer. Finally, she wanted a guitar that flattered her body and presentation style. Despite longing for a “gender-neutral guitar,” Clark consistently explored the construction of adorned femininity on stage and in music videos. Even in the early days of her career when she backed up Sufjan Stevens, Calexico, and the Polyphonic Spree before officially breaking out on her own, she often distinguished herself as one of if not the only female performer on stage by wearing frilly party dresses and stacked heels and highlighting her delicate features with glittery eyeshadow and dark lipstick. As she explained in a NAMM Q&A with *She Shreds* in 2016, “I was thinking a lot about what I wear onstage” when she was designing the guitar, noting that she wears her guitar high on her waist and that “a lot of guitars are really unflattering in that zone,” which made her self-conscious of her appearance and resulted in her decision to narrow the guitar’s waist.⁶⁸ As a result, the weight of the St. Vincent guitar shifted from the chassis to the neck, which was emblazoned with her double-circle “S” logo, in order to free up the performer to have better access to the fretboard, a hallmark of Clark’s frenetic, percussive playing style that departed from an emphasis on melodic playing and troubled the notion that players had to wield heavy-bodied guitars in order to consider themselves virtuosos behind the axe. Finally, Clark and Music Man added three mini-humbuckers and five selectors to the chassis that gave players greater tonal flexibility and extra frets that enable techniques like finger-picking and tapping that define Clark’s approach.

By this point, the St. Vincent Collection has gone through three stages. The inaugural Signature Series (2015-2016), which Clark debuted while opening for Taylor Swift during her *1989 World Tour*,⁶⁹ adhered to the sleek, retrofuturist designs favored by Japanese and American guitar manufacturers during the 1950s and ‘60s that captured the musician’s imagination as a child watching *La Bamba*. The second installment, the HH-Tone Monster (2017), expanded the collection while mimicking the look of ‘70s-era hollow-bodied guitars with sunburst finishes and deep saturated colors but remaining lighter and more buoyant than competing models like the Fender Stratocaster and the Gibson Les Paul. The third installment, the MASSSEDUCTION Limited Collection (2018-2019), used a neon color palette that gestured toward Clark’s thematic interests in the 1980s on her fifth album, which examined the seductive lure of fame and addiction through the sonic grammar of synth pop while paying tribute to her recently fallen heroes, Prince and David Bowie. The line’s cerulean, magenta, tangerine, and chartreuse

66. “New from NAMM 2016 - Ernie Ball Music Man St. Vincent Signature,” *Guitar Center*, 26 January 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ixx01SfMJtc>.

67. Choi, “St. Vincent’s Signature Guitars.”

68. “St. Vincent Answers Questions About Her New Signature Guitar,” *She Shreds*, 29 April 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xM_HoO9DHuk.

69. Luke Morgan Britton, “Taylor Swift performs with Beck and St. Vincent at LA Gig,” *NME*, 26 August 2015. <https://www.nme.com/news/music/taylor-swift-107-1217552>.

models intentionally clashed with the sets Clark's creative director, Willo Perron, designed for the album's accompanying music videos, television performances, and the stage set-up for *MASSEDUCTION*'s 2017-2018 Fear the Future tour. By this time, the St. Vincent Collection found its way in the hands of performers like Jack White, Taylor Swift, and Omar Rodriguez-López of Mars Volta and At the Drive-In, as well as Latinx and indigenous musicians like Sávila's Fabi Reyna and Black Belt Eagle Scout's Katherine Paul, who played St. Vincent guitars during their sets at *She Shreds*' 2019 South by Southwest showcase.

Clark also began to pursue other creative opportunities alongside the St. Vincent Collection's development and expansion. In 2015, she directed *The Birthday Party*, a short-form horror film. She parlayed this experience into the satirical vignettes she co-directed with Brownstein to promote *MASSEDUCTION*, which parodied the rapidity of press junket interviews and lampooned the sexism female artists often experience while trying to explain their work. A year later, she scored *Come Swim*, actress Kristen Stewart's directorial debut. Finally, she began channeling her experiences in the studio into a side career as a producer. She received her first producer credit on *MASSEDUCTION*, which she shared with Jack Antonoff, Lars Stalfors, and frequent collaborator John Congleton. She co-produced Taylor Swift's "Cruel Summer" with Antonoff and was credited as a songwriter for the chorus' interpolation of her *Strange Mercy* single "Cruel." Finally, in 2019 she produced Sleater-Kinney's *The Center Won't Hold*, a divisive effort due to the band's engagement with synth pop and drummer Janet Weiss's departure from the group weeks before the album's mid-August release. Some of Clark's musical work outside of St. Vincent has been dismissed as vanity projects, particularly her collaborations with Stewart and Brownstein, with whom she has been romantically involved in the past. Clark's work as a composer and a producer, however, builds upon and expands her considerable experience as a recording artist in new directions while creating opportunities for herself in professions that marginalize female talent. According to the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, 94 percent of the top 250 films at the U.S. box office in 2018 were composed by men.⁷⁰ USC's Annenberg Inclusion Institute reported similarly abysmal findings in a 2019 study that examined the gender and ethnic representation of the artists, producers, and songwriters behind the *Billboard*'s Hot 100 year-end charts from 2011 to 2018 and claimed that roughly two percent of the songs in their survey were produced by women.⁷¹ Furthermore, Clark's collaborations with former lovers opens up space for queer artists to work outside of and beyond the limits of the music industry's heteropatriarchal power relations. Such displays of creative ambition may have positive implications for future generations of female-identified musical performers.

70. Martha M. Lauzen, "The Celluloid Ceiling: Behind-the-Scenes Employment of Women on the Top 100, 250, and 500 Films of 2018," Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, https://womenintvfilm.sdsu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2018_Celluloid_Ceiling_Report.pdf.

71. Randall Roberts, "Female Songwriters and Producers Remain 'Vastly Outnumbered,' says USC Study of Music Industry," *Los Angeles Times*, 5 February 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/la-et-ms-usc-inclusion-music-business-20190204-story.html>.

FEEDBACK

Though the ongoing development of Music Man's St. Vincent Signature Series and its adoption by professional musicians suggests an evolution in rock culture's attitudes toward gender, Clark's brand partnership with a guitar company and equipment manufacturers' interest in cultivating a female consumer base should be understood as a gradual shift instead of a sea change. For one, despite being a prolific recording artist with a robust critical following, Clark and many of her contemporaries struggle to receive the same degree of commercial alternative radio support that allow popular male-led rock acts like Imagine Dragons, the Killers, and Muse to cross over from the genre charts to the *Billboard* Top 40. For example, *MASSEDUCTION*'s second and biggest single, "Los Ageless," spent three months on *Billboard*'s Alternative Songs chart but failed to crack the top 20. According to WFUV programming director Rita Houston, female artists' marginalization on alternative radio stems from an overrepresentation of risk-averse male programmers and executives who cannot or refuse to hear the commercial potential in women's approaches to rock songwriting, performance, arrangement, and production. As she explained to *Billboard*'s Chris Payne, "[T]here's something so artistic and adventurous about St. Vincent, [but] the alternative guys get scared away: 'Oh, that's too much art for us!'"⁷²

Furthermore, despite Music Man's partnership with St. Vincent, many equipment companies still exploit female objectification in order to sell musical equipment to an assumed male user base. In July 2018, TC Electronic announced the release of the Pussy Melter, an effects pedal set that Danish audio company produced with Russell "Satchel" Parrish, the lead guitarist of glam metal band Steel Panther. Such marketing fits within a broader historical pattern of sexist marketing from Dunlop and Pedal Plus, the guitar accessory companies responsible for producing effects pedals with lewd names like the Camel Toe and the Screaming Whore. In response to online backlash, TC rebranded the pedal set the "Repeat Offender" so as not to alienate customers. The company also shifted blame onto Satchel, stating in a press release that "[a]fter 10 days of furious email correspondence, late night phone calls, and countless suggestions from Satchel, all of which were even more offensive than the original, we decided that a simple homage to the artist himself was the way to go."⁷³ But TC did not change the pedal set's design beyond removing prurient language from its packaging, nor did they divest themselves from other Satchel-branded products like their cherry-red "Viagra Substitute" pedal. Steel Panther doubled down on its regressive branding by producing a limited-edition pedal set with It's Electric a month later. When the band launched the product on Twitter, they claimed to "support the right for all people to express themselves no matter where they are in the world" and seized on faux-empowerment rhetoric by stating that "the sound being

72. Chris Payne, "Women Are Dominating Alternative Rock, So Why Aren't They Dominating Alternative Radio?" *Billboard*, 19 April 2018. <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/rock/8220767/women-alternative-rock-radio-alice-merton-kflay-st-vincent>.

73. TC Electronic, "Repeat Offender TonePrints by Satchel." [https://www.tcelectronic.com/toneprints/toneprint-specific-artist/flashback-mini-delay-toneprints/flashback-mini-delay-satchel-repeat-offender#googtrans\(en|en\)](https://www.tcelectronic.com/toneprints/toneprint-specific-artist/flashback-mini-delay-toneprints/flashback-mini-delay-satchel-repeat-offender#googtrans(en|en)).

created by the Pussy Melter tone pack was intended to bring pleasure to females who heard it.”⁷⁴ The new model was magenta, a color that superficially aligned the tone pack with various totems of feminist commodification like breast cancer awareness paraphernalia, pussyhats, and erotic accessories and that Clark also used for her *MASSEDUCATION* guitar collection. Following Vibratex’s success with the Rabbit Pearl vibrator in the early 2000s, several intimate lifestyle companies produce sex toys in vivid shades of pink as a way to appeal to female, queer, and/or gender-nonconforming consumers. The Pussy Melter also mimicked erotica’s lascivious marketing by labeling the distortion knob “Dirty,” the volume knob “Load,” “Booty” for the low-end gain, “Sizzle” for the high-end gain, and “Moist/Gushing” for its switch system, as well as assigning a different pink shade for each function. Satchel explained in a YouTube tutorial that Sizzle was given a bubblegum hue because it was “obviously the closest to the actual color of the vagina” and winked at the dials’ resemblance to engorged clitorises by saying, “I know how much you like to play with pink knobs.”⁷⁵ Satchel also quipped that the Pussy Melter was designed by “top scientists at NASA and MIT” working “with other scientists at *Playboy* and *Hustler*,” a “joke” that reinforced sexist misperceptions that gear enables straight male gratification. Eight months later, the band released the Poontang Boomerang, a delay pedal named after their song about an ugly but enthusiastic groupie. Its name encircled a two-headed shaft built from a woman’s mirrored silhouette below a set of plugs that instructed players to “Pull out” and “Jam it.”⁷⁶

But while Steel Panther’s mobilization of branded gear for macho trolling reflects rock culture’s entrenched male chauvinism, it was heartening to see several musicians denounce the Pussy Melter and TC Electronics. Guitarist Jessica Fennelly set the backlash in motion by launching a petition to have TC remove the product from its catalogue because it suggested that the “guitar world is excluded from the professional boundaries enforced by society to ensure that no product offends, excludes, or harms a particular group of people.”⁷⁷ Several female-identified musicians and allies, including Japanese Breakfast’s Michelle Zauner and Ted Leo, shared Fennelly’s petition online and amplified its political directives by advocating that the company hire more women to help develop and market products for women and girls.⁷⁸ Many of them experienced online harassment and abuse. Braids frontwoman Raphaëlle Standell-Preston claimed that supporting Fennelly’s petition “opened a Pandora’s box of misogyny” that subjected her to flame wars, hacking, doxxing, and sexist fan-made

74. @Steel Panther, “We Respect and Love the Freedom of Speech Afforded All Citizens in the U.S. . . .,” *Twitter*, 7 August 2018, https://twitter.com/Steel_Panther/status/1026889024999444480.

75. Steel Panther, “Satchel Demos the Brand New ‘Pussy Melter,’” *YouTube*, 9 August 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZwtuMmliqE&feature=youtu.be>.

76. @Steel Panther, “Missed Your Shot at the #PussyMelter?” *Twitter*, 13 March 2019, https://twitter.com/Steel_Panther/status/1105923135138754560.

77. Jessica Fennelly, “Take Down the ‘Pussy Melter’ Preset on TC Electronic Effects!,” *iPetitions*, 8 July 2018, <https://www.ipetitions.com/petition/tcelectronicpresetpetition>.

78. Sam Tornow, “Braids, Japanese Breakfast and More Condemn Company for Sexist ‘Pussy Melter’ Guitar Pedal,” *Billboard*, 10 July 2018, <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/rock/8464732/braids-japanese-breakfast-condemn-sexist-pussy-melter-guitar-pedal-steel-panther>.

merchandise.⁷⁹ But Standell-Preston also challenged TC Electronic's and Steel Panther's original defense that the Pussy Melter's sexist marketing was meant to be funny by arguing that using comedy "as an automatic shield for offensive language" that excludes "women and non-binary players" from broader conversations about female musicians' virtuosity and influence.⁸⁰ Such minimization of female players' talent is symptomatic of broader systemic problems within the music industry, which has been slow to address pervasive issues of sexual misconduct against women and girls.⁸¹ It also ignores their buying power. In 2017, Fender's chief marketing officer Evan Jones conducted a national survey of U.S. guitar buyers under 45 that confirmed that "[f]ifty percent of all buyers of new guitars in the last five years have been female."⁸² Some of those players now have access to a wider range of tools, including Clark's Music Man collection, which encourage their development by accounting for their physical needs as players without ignoring or diminishing their gender.

If the guitar's consumer market in the United States has finally reached gender parity, which musicians capture new players' imaginations as their hands follow their imagination up and down the fretboard? If Clark spent her adolescence distilling her admiration for guitarists like Carrie Brownstein, "Dimebag" Darrell Abbott, and Kurt Cobain into her own angular, dialogic sound, with whom is she being synthesized? Another guitarist who grew up in a Southern suburb and came of age after riot grrrl and before Girls Rock Camp is Sarah Lipstate, who records under the alias Noveller and opened for St. Vincent's Digital Witness tour in spring 2014. As Noveller, Lipstate builds what she describes as "textural soundscape music" intended to create "an ecstatic sense of beauty" from intricate riffs that she filters through a complex system of effects pedals.⁸³ Though Lipstate eschews lyrics altogether, she and Clark similarly challenge the guitar's function as an instrument for vocal accompaniment. Furthermore, they are both veteran musicians who cut their teeth gigging with other performers before cultivating their own unique sound and who supplement their robust catalogues with various collaborative projects. After graduating from the University of Texas, where she hosted an experimental radio program and formed the electronic duo One Umbrella, Lipstate participated in no-wave pioneer Glenn Branca's 100-guitar symphony and Rhys Chatham's Guitar Army, and briefly joined Parts & Labor. Now, she supplements Noveller with session work for film composers; scores experimental, animated, and narrative shorts; and collaborates with guitarists like Nick Zinner.

79. Raphaëlle Standell-Preston, "Why I Fought the Sexist Gear Community (and Won)," *Pitchfork*, 20 July 2018, <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/why-i-fought-the-sexist-gear-community-and-won-braids-raphaëlle-standell-preston/>.

80. Standell-Preston, "Why I Fought the Sexist Gear Community."

81. Marc Hogan, "Why the Mainstream Music Industry is Still Struggling to Address #MeToo," *Pitchfork*, 19 December 2018, <https://pitchfork.com/features/article/why-the-mainstream-music-industry-is-still-struggling-to-address-metoo/>.

82. Natalie Baker, "We Are the 50%: The Truth Behind the Supposed Decline of the Guitar," *She Shreds*, 19 September 2017, <https://sheshredsmag.com/truth-behind-supposed-decline-guitar/>.

83. Jasper Willems, "Celestial Voyager." *Drowned in Sound*, 30 May 2017, http://drownedinsound.com/in_depth/4151064-celestial-voyager-dis-meets-noveller.

In March 2017, nearly a year before the Pussy Melter's inauspicious debut and a few years into Clark's Music Man cycle, Lipstate added "gear designer" to her resume when Dr. No approached her about developing her own effects pedal. Lipstate had long been a supporter of the Dutch effects pedal manufacturer. Lipstate stumbled across Dr. No's Octavia Buzz pedal at an Austin pawn shop and was taken with the carillon tone it helped her create.⁸⁴ The pedal she designed for Dr. No, the Moon Canyon, built overdrive, delay, and reverb effects—the foundation for Noveller's towering sonic edifices—into one unit. Such streamlining accounted for Lipstate's physicality as a musician—how she uses her nimble fingers to play and bend notes; how she uses her upper body to hold and manipulate her instrument; how she uses her feet to manifest her sense of timing by stomping on switches to record, repeat, and stop looped passages she generates from her guitar—in order to facilitate greater ease of use. It also nodded to Lipstate's training as a filmmaker by referencing Georges Méliès's *Le Voyage dans la Lune* in its packaging. The Moon Canyon features an anthropomorphic orb modelled after the man in the moon with the telescopic eye from Méliès's film at its center and is released online on the day of each month's full moon. The canonical 1902 silent film's vivid production design expanded *mise-en-scène's* cinematic possibilities and was heavily referenced in the video for Smashing Pumpkins' "Tonight, Tonight," a modern-rock staple during Lipstate's adolescence.⁸⁵ It also nodded to the silent experimental films Lipstate made for One Umbrella's stage shows, while the pedal's resemblance to a hard-bound book alludes to Lipstate's literary alias.⁸⁶

Finally, Lipstate has made some interesting decisions in terms of how she frames her first collaborative venture online. On Instagram, she uploads videos and images of herself playing with the Moon Canyon as a series of action shots and demonstrations. Such promotional logics reinforce her formidable musicianship and virtuosity as an embodied act instead of a pose to highlight her beauty and leave her vulnerable to female objectification. She also positions herself as a teacher who occasionally explains her tricks and techniques so that her followers can learn and emulate her performance style as they figure out what sounds they want to make.⁸⁷ Lipstate also removes herself from some images by posting short, one-take close-up shots of the Moon Canyon that she is manipulating off-camera.⁸⁸ Such strategic disembodiment further removes the player from the regime of decorous femininity by giving her followers physical and mental space to imagine themselves using the equipment. Finally, Lipstate stages her Moon Canyon in still life portraits of her sizable pedal collection. Such framing decisions work to identify

84. Britlynn Hansen-Girod, "The Pedalboard Sorcery of Sarah Lipstate of Noveller," *Reverb*, 13 September 2017, <https://reverb.com/news/interview-the-pedalboard-sorcery-of-sarah-lipstate-of-noveller>.

85. Anna Blumenthal, "Noveller Talks Cinematic Music and Her Healthy Obsession with Pedals," *Guitar World*, 25 October 2016. <https://www.guitarworld.com/artists/guitarist-noveller-cinematic-music-and-her-healthy-obsession-pedals>.

86. Britlynn Hansen-Girod, "The Pedalboard Sorcery."

87. @lipstate, "Transmission received," *Instagram*, 22 May 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/lipstate/p/BjFLcaBH7s5/>.

88. @lipstate, "Setting up my new @monocreator pedalboards for the new year!" *Instagram*, 2 January 2018, https://www.instagram.com/p/BddgDXMHdJV/?utm_source=ig_embed.

Lipstate as a gear collector, a hobby within rock culture that often occludes or masks female participation, while presenting her pedal collection as a mood board, a connotatively feminine practice of collage art that is remediated on digital platforms like Instagram and Pinterest, through the critical lens of women's cultural production. Lipstate, much like Clark, is seemingly able to navigate rock culture's toxic masculinity and gender essentialism with ease by partnering with an equipment manufacturer and benefiting from her considerable privilege as a white, cisgender, able-bodied woman. But, with any luck, these branding ventures will create tools with which future generations of musicians, not just female, femme, white women, can forge new worlds.

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