

Feminism At Its Finest:

You Don't Own Me

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Many may know "You Don't Own Me" by SayGrace from the Suicide Squad movie soundtrack. The famous track is known for the entrance of Harley Quinn into the movie's plot. However, this version of the song is actually a cover. The original song was written by John Madera and Dave White and recorded by Lesley Gore in 1963. At the time of this song's release, feminism wasn't yet a full swung movement. While the second red scare began to push women into oppressed gender roles, the tension from women began to build. This song contributed to the overall pickup of the feminist movement and spread the message that traditional gender roles could not be forced upon women any longer, showing that men could not take control of women and women could be independent human beings. This is demonstrated in "You Don't Own Me," which talks about the independence of women within the dating community. The writers talk about how women often felt owned and controlled within the dating community due to the misogynistic cultures of the time. Lesley Gore and her writers contradict these typical gender roles using ethos, pathos, and logos, as they appeal to the typical feminine appeals of the time while using a strong message with declarative language to convey that women are more than what they may seem. This gives a new meaning to music as a whole, introducing persuasion to the possibilities of music.

The feminine appeal of Lesley Gore was something to be unmistakable. She was the classic demonstration of beauty standards of the time. Her voice, while used to convey controversial and alternative matters, was incredibly feminine and sweet throughout most of her songs. She also believed that she had to fit the part of a feminine musician, stating in an interview with NPR's Fresh Air, "...I did believe you get up on stage and you dress up because there are lots of people there and it's importance. And you want to show yourself off to your best advantage" ("Fresh Air Remembers Lesley Gore Who Sang Hits Including 'You Don't Own Me'"). In her first hit, "It's

"My Party," she talks about normalized topics that many women at the time dealt with. This song, coupled with "You Don't Own Me," created an outreach towards younger feminine women who are fighting for equality and rightful treatment within dating. While she may not have written all of her songs, Gore agreed with the ideals and messages conveyed in her songs. She also provided more of the audience outreach that the original writers were looking for, as she had already established credibility within the intended audience. Lesley Gore was only 17 when "You Don't Own Me" was released ("Lesley Gore"). Many people viewed her songs as a message to her peers rather than a message to her fans. She was more relatable than the older white men who wrote her songs. Amy Salitsky says it best in her article about Lesley Gore, saying, "I was raised on the music of Lesley Gore by my mother, who herself was on the grasp of maturity when Gore's songs were on the Billboard charts. The songs my mother once used as a coping mechanism as a teen became the same for me. It offered me a closeness to my mother but also a great sense into just what the world once was" (Saltisky). Even to this day, the songs which Lesley Gore released are viewed as pieces of empowerment to young girls.

Additionally, the writers of "You Don't Own Me" used declarative statements which contradicted her very feminine appeal to exaggerate that femininity doesn't mean inferiority. As Amy Salitsky says in her article, "The song was a declaration of independence and a bit of respite in a male-dominated world" (Saltisky). The majority of music listeners at the time were used to listening to love songs, however Gore's song introduces them to a new side of musicians: a side in which they are not afraid to stand up for themselves and truly address issues within society. During the early 1960s, strong women who stood up for what they wanted were viewed as inferior and rebels. They were often hit, belittled, or beaten for this behavior, so many people neglected their own independence and rights over fear of men. This song was meant to counter

that destructive tradition. As Gore said in a 1991 interview with NPR's Fresh Air, "What I was impressed with was the strength. I've always hated wimpy women. I've never understood it. So when I first heard this piece of material I knew it was what I wanted to do" ("Fresh Air Remembers Lesley Gore Who Sang Hits Including 'You Don't Own Me'"). This song exposes the flaws in these traditional cultures, persuading the audience using declarative language to create a perspective that standing up for what you believe in is important. It stands as an empowerment piece and is used to persuade the audience into being empowered and independent themselves.

The music industry was beginning to take a turn during the 1960s away from the traditional pieces from the past. In 1963, the top songs were those that were lighthearted and carefree such as "Surfin' USA" by The Beach Boys ("1963"). Introducing topics that were less lighthearted and more goal-oriented allowed the music to become a genre used in rhetorical ways. Simply, music became an art when purpose was introduced. "You Don't Owe Me" became one of these songs which had purpose beyond "for fun." The introduction of true protest within music "was practically revolutionary," as Amy Saltisky says (Saltisky). This revolutionary change within the music genre opened the world up to the possibility of using music as an art, which is still used today. "You Don't Owe Me" became a segway for bands to express themselves through music, creating a precedent still used today in music. Bands like The Dead Kennedys and Rage Against the Machine were created simply to spread their opinions on topics which were controversial, following in Gore's footsteps and creating a completely different purpose for music.

To conclude, Lesley Gore and her writers used many different methods to convey their message. Contrasting the harsh statements with Gore's feminine appeal created a dramatic tension, using pathos to create emotions which contradict typical gender standards during the

1960s. Pathos is also used in the creation of a new purpose in music, as this was not commonly seen in popular music prior to Gore's song. Additionally, the writers used ethos to reach their target audience, as Lesley Gore had already created a persona within the music industry as someone who women could relate to. These methods of persuasion are used throughout the piece to create a persuasive piece of art which defies the overall cultural views that were held during the 1960s. This would eventually lead to the feminist movement picking up pace and musical artists around the world voicing their opinions in new and innovative ways.

Works Cited

“1963.” *Billboard Top 100*, 7 Mar. 2016, <http://billboardtop100of.com/1963-2/>.

This source tells the top 100 tracks of 1963, when Lesley Gore's song "You Don't Owe Me" was released. This list is useful because it provides context about the musical environment surrounding Lesley Gore's release. This allows better understanding of the era and the power in which Gore's song had.

“Fresh Air Remembers Lesley Gore Who Sang Hits Including 'You Don't Own Me'.” *NPR*, NPR, 20 Feb. 2015, <https://www.npr.org/2015/02/20/387769267/fresh-air-remembers-lesley-gore-who-sang-hits-including-you-dont-own-me>.

This source is a primary source about Lesley Gore's songs. This is an interview with Lesley Gore about her songs and what she stands for. In this interview, Gore tells her opinion of the songs which were written for her to sing. She talks about her experiences in the music industry and gives her opinion on her own music.

“Lesley Gore.” *Biography.com*, A&E Networks Television, 30 Nov. 2021, <http://www.biography.com/musician/lesley-gore>.

This source gives information about Lesley Gore's life. It talks about her young age within the music industry and how that played out for her. It also talks about her personal experiences with her sexual orientation and her later years.

Saltisky, Amy. "Lesley Gore: The Jewish Feminist Lesbian Pop Star Ahead of Her Time." *Hey*

Alma, 28 May 2020,

<https://www.heyalma.com/lesley-gore-the-jewish-feminist-lesbian-pop-star-ahead-of-her-time/>.

This source is a secondary source covering Lesley Gore's life and legacy. The source talks about the innovation that her music represented during the 1960s. It also discusses her defiance to the typical "nice jewish girl" image which was forced upon her.