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Testosterone Boys and Harlequin Girls: Androgyny and Misogyny in 2000s Emo Music and Culture

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Abstract

From approximately 2002-2008, the previously underground, punk rock offshoot known as “Emo” broke through to mainstream culture and became a musical phenomenon that would in part define the youth culture of the era. While there were two previous “waves” of Emo, this third wave, which included bands such as My Chemical Romance, Fall Out Boy, Paramore, Jimmy Eat World, Brand New, and Taking Back Sunday, was the first to find mainstream success. In addition to being a distinctive musical sound, Emo of this era also had specific fashions, aesthetics, emerging internet communities, mental health advocacy, and shared values around acceptance of the socially othered. However, there was significant hypocrisy in how those values were enacted, especially towards the women in the community. Here, I will be specifically looking at the relationship between gender presentation and misogyny in third wave Emo. The aesthetics of the genre and the emotional, introspective nature of the music led to interesting subversions of gender norms which seems to be part of the genre’s success; however, this subversion took place alongside many songs with incredibly misogynistic lyrical themes and an extreme lack of female representation in the genre. Additionally, in the past few years, there have been

substantial allegations of sexual misconduct from many of the men in these bands against members of their largely young, female fan base. After defining the genre more specifically, I will approach these questions of gender politics in 3rd wave Emo through a series of three case studies on specific musicians from the era and how they relate to these questions of gender, gender presentation, and how misogyny manifested in this scene.

Introduction

The early 2000s ushered in a brand-new era for American culture. From all-denim red-carpet outfits, frosted tips, and low-rise jeans to the rise of the internet being used as a social space and the political tone of disillusionment and unease; the culture of the new millennium came in hard, fast, and unapologetic. One defining piece of 2000s youth culture was the mainstream crossover success of Emo music. While the genre title had been around since the mid-80s, Emo had remained a fringe genre. However, the cult appeal and indie credibility of these bands developed into strong local scenes in the 90s, eventually growing enough (in part, through internet song sharing) to cross over into the mainstream and become a genre, aesthetic, and culture which would partially define the decade.

Emo is a genre that resists definition at every turn. Even books dedicated to defining the genre spend a significant amount of time describing how hard it is to pinpoint what qualifies a band as emo. In Andy Greenwald's book *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo*, one of very few primary and published sources on Emo music and culture, the author notes, "Emo seems *solely* to mean different things to different people… confusion is one of its hallmark traits" (p.1). Additionally, many Emo bands refuse to identify with the genre, seemingly due into the bias the genre faced for most of its existence. *In Where Are Your Boys Tonight? The Oral History of Emo's Mainstream Explosion* author Chris Payne notes, "approximately zero of the bands covered in this book – or the ones that came before them – owned up to 'emo' tag" (p. xiv). Even Ian McKay, DC hardcore punk legend who is credited with being a major part of the initial development of the emo sound still says, "It's such an obscure form and so hard to define. I don't know what the criteria is to be emo" (Markarian 31).

This resistance to the emo title can be partially attributed to genre labels often coming from the business and marketing around bands, rather than the bands themselves – which is true for most popular music. However, a large part of resistance to "emo" as a definition likely comes from the term also being widely used as an insult. In *From The Basement: A History of Emo Music and How It Changed Society*, Ian McKay notes that from the very beginning, emo "was a derisive term making fun of [early Emo bands]… 'Those guys are playing emocore and talking about their feelings.' And he was making fun of us" (Markarian

21). The author goes on to elaborate that Emo is "the tagline associated with a particularly emotional brand of punk and hardcore that nobody wanted to be associated with in the first place. When the term 'emo' first got thrown around, there was essentially already a built-in handbook for how to mock it" (21). Therefore, the main differential for emo bands seems to be how the word was used as a pejorative and insult to both bands and individuals. Much of this bias is likely rooted in homophobia and misogyny as the genre was mocked for the emotionality of the music because it was seen as un-masculine, especially in contrast to the hyper-machismo of the hardcore punk scene and the confident posturing of mainstream rock and pop stars. Deviation from socially expected masculinity often gets men mocked for seeming "girly" or "gay". Most people who grew up in the 2000s can confirm that this thought continued as Emo became mainstream, resulting in Emo becoming synonymous with calling someone gay to insult them. To openly talk about personal emotions, even delivered with screaming vocals, was deemed as feminine behavior, which was typically considered a socially unacceptable for men for a long time. In *From the Basement,* Markarian elaborates on this, writing, "the word 'emo' is intrinsically problematic because emotions themselves are intrinsically problematic…[reflecting] deeply (and out loud) about emotions like pain and love is not traditionally culturally acceptable for a male, and the bands in the emo and screamo music scenes were mostly comprised of young men. [the] prevailing mentality was that emotions were things that belonged to women" (Markarian 33-34). While this mentality made the genre name something resisted by the almost entirely male bands, they still undoubtedly occupied a type of social androgyny as they began occupying a thematic space deemed feminine. Some bands grew to embrace this more, styling themselves in a more androgynous way. However, this feminine social categorization by and large did not seem to make these male bands more sympathetic to the female experience or attribute equal personhood to women. This is not the first example of this phenomenon in popular music cultures. From the 60s British Invasion bands to 70s/80s Glam Rock, there is a history of male musicians who play with gender and present with more androgyny yet perpetuate intensely misogynistic ideas in their lyrics. Also like these musical predecessors, emo attracted a largely female fan base, especially when the mainstream crossover started in the late 90s/early 2000s. In *Where Are Your Boys*… several men associated with the emo scene report noticing an influx of women at shows in the late 90s, to the point where the shows became more of a 50/50 gender split, as opposed the earlier male-dominated audience of hardcore punk shows (109).This makes sense under the common thought that the more emotional lyrics and displays of vulnerability from emo bands resonated with women and girls – the maintenance of the punk ethos still accessed feelings of anger, but the more introspective and complicated emotions found in emo

music spoke to how most women were socialized to interpret and express their inner worlds.

Like all punk and alternative music, Emo highlights the feeling of being an outsider, meaning that the fan base and community space that forms around the music (the so called "scene") becomes a collection of outsiders banding together to find belonging. This may be an idealistic view, but it is usually the ideological core of most punk and alternative genres. This is especially true in Emo, as this genre's DIY origins and the culture it fostered of emotional vulnerability and communal catharsis served to remove the usual boundaries between the audience and the performer, which is something that was not commonly found in mainstream music at the time. That breakdown of barriers created a powerful feeling of community and comradery. As an audience member in this environment, it feels like you and the band are experiencing the same thing, feeling the same feeling, and it created a particular bond in the mainstream crossover where the rock gods worshiped by these teenage girls were both idolized and close enough to touch, quite literally. This perpetual connection to community and blurring of performance boundaries also made it easy for some of these band members to access the teenage girls in their fan based who idolized and would do anything for these men, leading to a notable issue with sexual abuse in mainstream Emo (Tepfenhart). Clearly, social androgyny and being viewed as "too feminine" did not instill understanding or empathy in many of these male band members, and in some cases seemed to create a strong reactionary misogyny disguised as emotional vulnerability; manipulation presented as raw honesty.

The problems with misogyny and sexual abuse in mainstream emo have been discussed more openly in the past few years, and it is an important dialogue to engage with. This music and culture did a lot of good and a lot of harm, both things are true. Ignoring either to highlight the other does not paint the full picture of the impact of mainstream emo. I grew up as one of mainstream emo's young female fans, and I was an active member of the generation of emo bands that came after the mainstream bubble burst. Being able to experience both the positives and negatives of this subculture firsthand sparked my interest in analyzing the gender dynamics present in the community socially and musically. I believe it is incredibly important to document this community and its evolving sound and values as fully and accurately as possible. Trying to erase all the damage and abuse perpetuated in this scene does nothing but protect the perpetrators from being held to any accountability; but writing off the entire genre because of that harm also dismisses the real good that also came from this community. Like anything created by humans, emo music and culture are complicated and the research around the genre should reflect and discuss its many and varied aspects. However, to discuss Emo music, we must first revisit the challenge of how to define it.

What makes a band emo?

Emotionally vulnerable and introspective lyrics are one of the few attributes of emo music most people seem to agree on. While there is debate about other attributes, I have compiled a list from various sources and my own listening in an attempt to give a broad strokes definition of the genre, its sound, and of Emo's different eras and iterations; keeping in mind, of course, that all genre definitions are relative, and exceptions exist for every rule. To most accurately define Emo, I am taking an approach similar to how medical fields define a syndrome; so rather than one definitive marker that qualifies a band as Emo, it can be defined by a collection of attributes, and having enough of those attributes can qualify one as an Emo band. This also helps to connect the different "waves," which will be elaborated on later in the article.

The emo sound is grounded in punk roots. The genre was birthed out of the D.C. hardcore scene, and certain punk attributes remain throughout every wave, notably in the heavy rhythms, but can also be found in the incorporation of harsh vocals or screaming. However, Emo sets itself apart musically by integrating more melodic musical elements and pop sensibilities. This is largely found in the guitar work which moves beyond power chords to more intricate melodies: sometimes taking cues from metal riffs, sometimes using bright and twinkly melodies, and even incorporating guitar tapping techniques typically associated with 80s hair metal. The vocals also typically have more singable melodies, and harsh vocals are often used to color specific sections of the song rather than being the primary sound. However, the vocalists are often untrained and use self-developed and outsider techniques, which still connects the vocals to the outsider art of its punk roots. There are exceptions to this typical sound (such as Fall Out Boy and Paramore), but even the more clearly untrained vocalists still construct memorable and listenable vocal melodies. Regardless of talent, a typical vocal performance from an emo band stands out because even when it is lacking in skill, it is made up for in the raw, authentic expression and catharsis of the performance.

As emphasized earlier, introspective and emotional lyrics are defining attributes of the genre. While most music is infused with emotion, what sets Emo apart is how it is always blatantly brought to the forefront. While the lyrics often have a poetic quality, they are used to highlight rather than obscure the emotion. The subjects are usually difficult and painful emotions – heartbreak, pain, betrayal, shame, depression – and the lyrics usually take these themes and direct them inward. The individuals in the band are exploring these themes and what they mean to them and how it feels to them, adding a personal sentiment that resonates deeply with audiences. This is likely the primary reason for this genre's popularity.

Another important genre marker and consistent attribute of emo is being perpetually rooted in the DIY community. While I did not find this commonly identified as a defining quality of the genre, with minimal exception, even the most popular and mainstream emo bands came up through a DIY music scene, playing basements and VFW halls long before amphitheaters. This adds to the sense of community and the closeness felt between audience and performer. “This love for the lack of boundary between fan artists stems from hardcore ethos” (Markarian 66). This connection can have the very positive impact of letting a person, especially a young person, feel seen. It is so vital to the genre that Andy Greenwald suggests in *Nothing Feels Good* the term emo itself signifies that specific relationship. “It’s the desire to turn a monologue into a dialogue, to be a part of the art that affects you and to connect to it on every possible level” (Greenwald 4). That is how emo feels and functions at its best – a community of outsiders coming together and the feeling of the band being a conduit for the most difficult feelings, thereby realizing, you aren’t alone in this pain. However, at its worst, this blurring of boundaries fostered spaces where abuse, specifically emotional and sexual abuse of girls and young women, was allowed to run rampant; especially as the bands gained higher socioeconomic standing and held far more power and notoriety (Pelly).

Waves of Emo

The variations between different eras of emo music are commonly referred to as “waves” within the community. While it is a term I have always heard in the scene, and one referenced in all the sources I used, I was not able to find any original source or evidence of it being coined by anyone in particular. I will be using this terminology as the official form of categorization here because it is the term used in the community, and I think it is the most effective way to explain different eras of emo as it can describe the small generational differences between the waves, the geographical distinctions, the slight variations in musical aesthetics, and differences in mainstream crossover.

1st wave, 1983-1991

One of the few Emo facts that people can agree on is that Emo was born out of the late 80s Washington D.C. hardcore punk scene. Rites of Spring is generally credited as being the first Emo band. They took the speed and aggression of the D.C. punk scene and channeled it inwards (Markarian 19-23, Greenwald 11-14). Ian MacKay, punk legend and father of straight edge, became a fan of the band and recorded their first EP. He also started the band Embrace, which was inspired by the introspective emotionality of Rites of Spring. Several more bands of this sound started popping up in the scene and were titled

"emotional hardcore" or "emocore." Early on it was shortened to just "emo," which was used as shorthand to both identify and mock the genre. One of the hallmarks of the hardcore punk scene was overly aggressive masculine anger, so for these new bands to be so frank about their emotions made them worthy of ridicule and the genre was seen as un-masculine compared to the machismo of hardcore punk. This theme of misogyny being reflected towards emo from the wider world is consistent through the end of the third wave at least. The misogyny also paired with homophobic ideas at the time that anything veering from traditional masculinity was "gay", and being "gay" was a very bad thing. This mentality intensified in the third wave when intentional androgyny became the image of the genre to the wider world. This first wave died out after a few years as bands naturally broke up or moved to other projects. Ian MacKay went on to form Fugazi, which typically isn't considered an Emo band. The recordings made by these bands would continue to circulate in alternative music circles, birthing a new flock of emo bands.

2nd wave, 1991-1999

Here is where we see the influence of the first wave spread to different parts of the country, and the genre begins to pick up some more indie rock elements, while still exhibiting characteristics of its punk roots. The two primary bands on the West Coast, Jawbreaker and Sunny Day Real Estate, are presented in *Nothing Feels Good* as the two stylistic branches of emo. Of these two bands, Jawbreaker maintained more of the punk aggression which would go on to influence many post-hardcore adjacent emo bands; while Sunny Day Real Estate leaned towards indie rock with a raw emotionality (Greenwald 19-21, 28-33). This era developed many sounds that would become staples of the genre, evolving a little further from the hardcore sound to incorporate more indie rock influence and more complex melodies while holding onto an unrefined edge and anger boiling below the surface. This era also birthed a style of "twinkly guitar," which is defined by very brightly toned, high octave melodies, usually playing fast arpeggios, contributing to a trebly, twinkling sound. While Jawbreaker and Sunny Day Real Estate are primarily west coast bands, this era was most prevalent throughout the DIY basement scene across the Midwest, with Illinois being a particularly active scene. In fact, the twinkly guitar work and nasally vocals that developed in many bands of this wave became so distinct that it evolved into the specific subgenre "Midwest emo", which still influences modern bands and exists on smaller scales. On the East Coast, the evolution continued from the D.C. emocore breakthrough, moving up to northern New Jersey and New York - New Brunswick and Long Island being hotbeds for the development of a DIY emo community. This is where many of the big names for the following wave would come from.

3rd wave 1999 - 2009

This is where Emo crosses over into the mainstream and is the primary focus of this article. There are several potential reasons for this being the wave that was able to achieve mainstream success, but two primary factors are the rise of the internet and the social atmosphere of post-9/11 America. While the popularity of emo had been steadily growing through the late 90s with the hometown communities growing as well, the Arizona band Jimmy Eat World can be credited as the first major crossover artist. In 2001, their fourth album, *Bleed American* (changed to *Jimmy Eat World* after 9/11) charted for 70 weeks in *Billboard*, peaking at #31. The single from this album, "The Middle" was on the billboard charts for 33 weeks in early 2002, peaking at #5. This opened the door for a flood of other emo bands to cross over into mainstream popularity. These bands, like Fall Out Boy, My Chemical Romance, Brand New, Taking Back Sunday, Dashboard Confessional, Say Anything, and Saves the Day, followed suit with charting albums and songs. The popularity skyrocketed with some of these bands becoming staples of MTV music video cycles and teen magazine covers. This is where the internet began to play a huge role.

The early 2000s saw the birth of online chatrooms, forums, and eventually Myspace. It cannot be overstated how vital this was to developing the popularity of the genre. Regional communities were able to connect online and share the music of their communities, creating a national base for these bands and enabling them to tour nationally very quickly into this breakthrough. The national touring was also supported by Vans Warped Tour; a traveling, all-ages festival which initially began with mostly punk and some nu metal bands, but after the 2000s emo breakthrough it became so populated by emo bands that the two are now culturally synonymous.

As with many music phenomena of the past century, the fame of these bands was largely supported by teenage girls. They seemed to resonate with the emotionality and vulnerability of the lyrics, and that presentation made each band member into prime sensitive, heartthrob material. It is important to note however that the emotional vulnerability these girls seemed to resonate with weren't always soft or palatable emotions. While the article is specifically about the teen girl fanbase of Nine Inch Nails, author Jude Ellison S. Doyle captures an idea that I believe was experienced by the teen girl fans of emo as well: "[All] that jocky, cocky, screaming rage, all that raw male power that was supposed to scare or exclude us, was *relatable*. Teenage girls get rage; they get self-hatred. Teenage girls know what it's like to want to cuss and scream and fuck and thrash around incoherently because you don't have the agency to do any of those things" (Doyle).

In stark contrast to the fan base, nearly every popular (or even semi-popular) emo band was entirely male, with the only major exception being Hayley Williams from Paramore. In *Where Are Your Boys Tonight?: The Oral History of Emo's Mainstream Explosion,* of the over

150 people interviewed, only 31 are women, and of that, only 8 were musicians in the scene. The women in the scene seem to primarily have been fans, journalists, managers, or other PR/admin roles. It is interesting that women were largely not accepted on stage as fellow artists, but were allowed to be in those managerial roles – a dynamic that feels very close to the common cultural idea of women needing to "take care" of the men in their lives and being responsible so the boys do not have to be.

An additionally troubling aspect of the worsening gender dynamics is the incredible misogyny in the songs themselves, which often demonize and dehumanize women as promiscuous heartbreakers, usually without even a name to identify them as a person. This is put very well in rock critic Jessica Hopper's 2003 essay "Where the Girls Aren't," where she writes, "[girls] in emo songs today do not have names. Women are not identified beyond their absence; their shape is drawn by the pain they've caused… They're vessels redeemed in the light of boy-love. On a pedestal, on their backs. Muses at best. Invisible at worst" (Hopper 259). Part of the misogyny specifically fostered in emo culture of this wave was enabled by Warped Tour, and specifically the fact that it was all ages. While this touring festival being all ages was very positive for building the popularity of these bands, and it was a great opportunity for young fans to see their favorite performers, it also became a place where many groups of men in their early 20s, riding a rock-star-fantasy-come-true were allowed direct contact with underage teen girls who saw them as idols that they would do anything for. There have been more and more cases over the past ten years of women coming forward to disclose coercive and abusive sexual relationships with members of many of these bands while the women were still underage girls (Alder, Telford). While this was not the case for every band, there have been enough reports for it to be an undeniable pattern that this culture fostered – or at least ignored and allowed.

The bands of this wave, and potentially their new mainstream appeal, are also connected to the social atmosphere of post 9/11 America. The primary and most direct connection is that witnessing the attack is what inspired My Chemical Romance front-person and founding member, Gerard Way to start a band. But additionally, I believe that the tone of this music fits a cathartic need of that time. The country was at war, and it was an undeniably dark time, but it was also frowned upon to outwardly spout any sentiment that felt too anti-American. This was a time where everything was changing, but also felt dark and hopeless – and while people were angry, they also felt powerless. I believe the raw expression of difficult emotions, particularly depression, shame, and hurt, spoke to the national mindset, especially that of young people. This is partly why this wave died out shortly after the Bush administration ended. Even though we were recovering from economic collapse, there was more hope for the future (amongst younger Americans in particular) for America's global standing under the Obama administration. The end of the 2000s also saw many of the largest Emo bands hitting a wall and breaking up or going on

hiatus. For some the level of fame was overwhelming, others fell deep into addiction, and then some just seemed to be growing up and evolving into new sounds.

This is part of what makes classifying these eras as "waves" rather than new subgenres make sense – when laid out chronologically, one can see how the waves come in generationally, with a new one cresting about every 10 years, roughly the span of a young generation building a music community, celebrating it, and then growing out of it. It isn't a phase, because the impact, interest, and love stay with you, but for most people it stops being all consuming, or one simply becomes ready for more complicated emotionality.

4th and 5th Wave 2010-2025:

There are arguably two other waves after the 3rd mainstream cross over. The 4th wave ran roughly from 2010-2020. In *Where Are Your Boys Tonight?,* Payne argues that emo rap was the evolution of mainstream emo, and it certainly does maintain the emotional characteristics and the mainstream popularity of 3rd wave emo. However, that ignores a huge collection of bands whose sound was more of a clear evolution of the 3rd wave, integrating 1st and 2nd wave sounds, and supported by a DIY circuit. The difference is that none of these bands gained a substantial crossover to mainstream popularity. The closest would likely be the California band Mom Jeans, who currently have 2.2 million monthly listeners on Spotify and gained significant traction in 2019-2020 by having their songs used as popular audio clips on TikTok. While there is some disagreement about whether we have entered a 5th wave of Emo, I believe we undoubtedly have. This follow the roughly ten-year generation pattern seen up to now, and takes into account how the COVID pandemic so fundamentally changed the world that nothing was quite the same after. Not only have musical aesthetics changed, but live performance and music communities look completely different now. If Emo is a genre inherently tied to DIY music communities, we must be in a new wave, because the structure of those communities and how they function has fundamentally changed as well. It is interesting to note how much this new 5th wave embraces on the 3rd wave both musically and aesthetically. This could be attributed to the nostalgia cycle bringing many y2k aesthetics and cultural touchstones back into popularity, but for whatever reason, emo and all its musical and social implications seem to no longer be wielded as an insult, but rather they are seen as a legitimate subculture.

Androgyny and Misogyny in Case Studies

Gender is a complicated and multifaced subject, and its interactions with third wave emo is no exception. There was significant gender play in this era, specifically men wearing make-up, painting their nails, wearing "girl jeans," and a general aesthetic of gender

subversion, similar to glam rock and hair metal. However, this aesthetic adoption of the feminine didn't, by and large, affect the treatment of the women and girls in the third wave emo scene who still faced rampant misogyny. There was also still the connotation at the time that the more emotional lyrics were un-masculine and not socially acceptable for men to perform, therefore even the men who did not participate in aesthetic gender subversion still faced misogynistic and homophobic insults for performing feminine emotionality. Even worse, this emotional vulnerability combined with mainstream status and significant appeal to young female audiences seemed to create a perfect environment for men ready to weaponize that appearance of emotional vulnerability to take advantage of teen girls. There is also the issue of the nearly total lack of female representation in the music itself. These are all complicated and intensive situations to explore, but to scratch the surface and start the conversation, I will be approaching these issues through the case studies of individual artists in the scene that I believe embody the aesthetics of androgyny, abusive misogyny, and the experience of being female in this scene, respectively.

Gerard Way, My Chemical Romance

Icons of the scene and the first band most people think of when you say "emo," My Chemical Romance was formed in northern New Jersey in 2001, after frontperson Gerard Way witnessed the destruction of the twin towers on September 11th. Like other bands of the scene, they started in the DIY basement circuit, but immediately set themselves apart by performing in full vampire glam rock attire. If that wasn't enough to make them standout, they were, as Eyeball Records co-founder Alex Saavedra puts it, "a fucking nerd herd. They would play Dungeons & Dragons and read comic books" (Payne 108). They were outsiders to the outsiders, anchored by Gerard Way who was at the time an animator, aspiring comic book writer, and horror fanatic who had already been engaging in theatrical gender subversion. He is quoted in a 2004 interview saying, ""I went to school in drag, in art school... as like an experiment and it worked really well" (troublebunchmusic). Both Gerard and his brother and MCR bassist Mikey Way were primarily influenced by 80s glam rock bands, and they continued to be the band pushing emo to it theatrical limits. Cobra Starship front man Gabe Saporta noted "[the] theatrical, makeup, all-black stuff wasn't a thing until [MCR] came around. They had different influences they drew from" (Payne 115). MCR quickly gained traction and expanded out of the basement scene, performing international tours with The Used, and becoming Warped Tour headliners and darlings. Their first major cross over was their second album "Three Cheers for Sweet Revenge" which was on the billboard charts for 77 weeks, peaking at #28. However, their following album, "The Black Parade" is what cemented them as emo royalty and figures of mainstream pop culture. That album was on the charts for 58 weeks, peaking at #2,

eventually going platinum; and the title track charted for 26 weeks, peaking at #9, and has since been inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. Something interesting to note about MCR is that, in addition to gender play, they are lyrically one of the least misogynistic bands in the scene. While still dealing with intense emotions, their songs don't follow the typical pattern of most emo songs of the time, which tend to focus on villainizing a girl for not being interested in the given band member. In fact, in a scene that wouldn't even humanize the women in their songs with a name, the lead single of their breakthrough album is titled "Helena." Even the violence in their lyrics is never misogynistically motivated. In MCR, and Gerard Way in particular, we see an authentic-feeling gender play and a real empathy for the female experience. This is likely part of the reason why MCR developed such a large female fanbase.

While a strong fanbase of teenage girls was nearly a prerequisite for an emo band of this era gaining mainstream success, MCR was one of the few bands who seemed to value their female fan base in a sincere way. While it is hard to find old concert footage now that YouTube is cracking down on copyright claims, it is still possible to find a clip of Gerard Way on stage sometime between 2004-2006, telling a stadium, largely filled with teenage girls, "If you ever see shitty ass rock dudes in shitty ass rock bands asking you to show them your tits for a backstage pass, I want you to spit right in their fucking face and yell 'fuck you'"("Gerard Way's Bold Message on Bad Rock Bands"). Way is the only artist of this era that I have found stating this issue so plainly and trying to actually empower the impressionable young girls in his fanbase. This implies it was an issue in the scene and makes MCR standout as one of the only bands I found in my research who ever actively spoke out about this problem.

MCR stands out when discussing androgyny in 3rd wave emo not just because of the emotional lyrics and aesthetics, but also because of direct lyrical content. Particularly their song from *The Black Parade*, "Mama" which details the main character of this concept album addressing his complicated maternal relationship. Specifically, the lyrics of the speaker saying, "You should have raised a baby girl/I could have been a better son" seems to have very effectively tapped into a very specific and difficult feeling in the trans, and particularly nonbinary, community and is part of what made the band a queer awakening for many fans (Hyun Kim).

The sincerity of his androgyny and the respect shown for the women and girls in the fan base is very likely tied to Gerard Way's own personal relationship to gender and gender expression. In a reddit AMA in the early 2010s, Way responded to a fan thanking him for helping them understand their gender identity by saying, "I have always been extremely sensitive to those that have gender identity issues as I feel like I have gone through it as well, if even on a smaller scale. I have always identified a fair amount with the female gender and began at a certain point in MCR to express this through my look and

performance style…Masculinity to me has always made me feel like it wasn't right for me" (Reddit). Additionally, for a while his shared pronouns on social media were he and they. This androgyny was pushed even further when MCR reunited in 2019. For every show on that tour, Way wore different, traditionally feminine outfits – from a cheerleader to a nurse to a smart skirt suit. While this took place well after the 3rd wave of emo they came up in, it speaks to an energy that was always there and spoke very strongly to young girls and queer people. To further show that this is not a performative marketing ploy, MCR and Gerard Way have and continue to be very vocal advocates for LGTBQ+ and especially trans rights.

While every band has a complicated history, MCR and particularly Gerard Way seems to consistently engage in a gender subversion and androgyny which feels authentic, and they possess the lowest levels of misogyny in bands of this era; both of which are shown through repeated actions and support of LGBTQ+ community and empowerment of their female fan base.

Jesse Lacy, Brand New

One of the primary bands to come out of the Long Island scene around the start of the third wave was Brand New. While they did not reach the same cultural ubiquity as MCR, they were still a major emo crossover band with substantial mainstream success. Their first album was released in 2001, and they quickly grew a local fan base which then rapidly evolved into a national fanbase, their next album charted in the billboard top 100 for 26 weeks. These first two albums followed a more straightforward emo sound, but they began incorporating more indie and post hardcore sensibilities in the following albums, while still being sonically and lyrically tied to their roots. Their music also contains many examples of the lyrical misogyny typical of many bands of this era. Some songs are about the basic dehumanizing and vilifying of a nameless girl, but other songs detail the even more troubling trend of misogynistic violence. In 2017, after releasing their first new album in eight years, substantial accusations of sexual abuse came out against singer, frontman, and lyricist, Jesse Lacey. Presumably, because of the warranted fall out from those accusations, it seems many other men in the scene at that time do not want to talk about Jesse Lacey at all. In *Where Are Your Boys Tonight?,* Payne addresses the accusations against Lacey in the introduction of the book, writing, "I attempted to depict where and how Brand New drove the narrative of the 2000s emo boom, without glorifying Lacey himself" (Payne xiv). In attempting to toe this line, it feels more like Payne is attempting to ignore this part of the culture entirely, rather than explore the two truths that "Brand New was arguably the most innovative and critically acclaimed band of their scene" (Payne xiv) and that Lacey was a serial abuser who seriously harmed many teenage girls. There is one

story share by author and journalist for Alternative Press, Leslie Simon which serves as the most substantial indication in the book of Lacey's misogynistic pattern of behavior:

> "As a female, I had to work actively and consistently hard to prove my worth and that I wasn't a groupie and a frivolous fangirl…Brand New disliked my 2003 cover story so much that they refused to do press with [Alternative Press] after. And the reason they didn't like the story was I had seen them do things… If you're hanging out, unless you say 'off the record,' it's on the record. And the first night I was with them on tour, there was this after-party. Not one of them talked to me, not one of them acknowledged my presence. So I sat on the balcony of this bar and just watched them do stuff all night, which included getting wasted, pulling girls into photo booths and making out, and some of that made it into the story. And they were pissed. They were just douchebags… Jesse thought he could manipulate the story and try to flirt with me. He turned to me randomly and was like, *Has anyone ever told you that you look like*…And he'd say some weird, dark-haired female celebrity who I don't look like. And I said, *No, no one's ever said that before*. He's like, *Yes, you're very striking.* And I'm thinking, *Okay, that's not going in the story, get out of here*. (Payne 197-198)

This example of manipulation is very important to note, even in what seems like this smaller instance, because clearly it had worked before, and that manipulation was key in every account shared by survivors of his abuse. The emotionality and raw vulnerability of Lacey's lyrics, while typical for the genre, also served to lay the groundwork for his manipulation, intentionally or not. It made him come off as softer and safer – more in touch with his emotions and therefore less dangerous, less capable of harm than the typically masculine man.

A common theme for Brand New songs, especially as their career progressed, is the feeling of being a horrible, irredeemable person. Some songs explore this theme directly through descriptions of misogynistic and sexual violence. Lacey maintained for many years that in these songs he was occupying a character, however that seems far less likely now, knowing what he was doing. A striking example of this is song "Me vs. Maradona vs. Elvis", where Lacey details the process of getting a girl drunk to take home and subsequently rape. This song includes the lyrics, "I got desperate desires and unadmirable plans… My sober, straight face gets you out of your clothes… Barely conscious in the door where you stand… I almost feel sorry for what I'm gonna do", and the second verse ends with the horrifying couplet, "You're a drunk and you're scared/ It's ladies night, all the girls drink for free". If this doesn't seem damning enough, the chorus of the song is "I will lie awake/ And lie for fun and fake the way I hold you/ Let you fall for every empty word I say." After reading the accounts of the women who came forward about his abuse, these lines are even more chilling, because they all recount very similar experiences, especially to that of the emotions presented in the chorus. One of the women victimized by Lacey, only going by

the name Aiyana, describes in her *Medium* article about her abuse, the feeling of having the singer of your favorite band "choose" you:

> After the hug, I gave him a couple of handmade gifts, and that's when he asked for my contact information. I remember feeling shocked and flattered, thinking that this connection might be the beginning of something meaningful. I believed that, somehow, someway, what I shared with him about his music, along with the gifts I gave him and the band, had finally achieved what I'd long hoped for: to stand out as the one who truly loved, understood, and valued his music the very most. Even his slight interest in potentially making contact with me in the future felt unbelievable.

Not only were these girls still children, but they also idolized Lacey completely, he had total control over them.

The first public accounts of his abuse came out in 2017 and were widely publicized in many major music news sources. Jesse Lacey issued a subsequent apology that had no real accountability behind it or acknowledged any specific responsibility. However, the band canceled their tour and went publicly silent. In 2025, Brand New announced their first tour since the first accusations, and in response another woman came forward with detailed descriptions of the same grooming process described by the first two women, this time with photos of her at 15 on the tour bus with the band, Lacey meeting this girl's family, and more. All these women tell different versions of the same story of grooming and sexual abuse which they have had to carry into adulthood and still affects their lives and relationships to this day.

Jesse Lacey is a prime example of this and represents the worst aspects of the scene: egotism, hypocrisy, misogyny, inability to take accountability, using emotional vulnerability as a predatory tool, and the sexual abuse of teenage girls. However, he is by no means the only instance of this. Perhaps because of how foundational they were to the scene, perhaps because they had just put out their first album in eight years when allegations surfaced, perhaps for some other reason, the accusations against Lacey gained real traction and were rightfully taken seriously. However, the past several years have yielded many reports and allegations of the sexual abuse of minors in the emo and pop punk scenes from many different bands, especially those associated with Warped Tour. Lacey is far from the only perpetrator, but there is a sense that he has been made the scapegoat for all of them. This can be evidenced in "Where Are Your Boys Tonight?" While Payne addresses Lacey's allegations and disavows him in the introduction, the most he speaks on it again is in the last chapter, writing "This era of emo no doubt fostered other, much less famous, yet just as harmful offenders, who took advantage of their elevated platform in a male-dominated scene. For the genre to maintain its relevance, this reckoning must continue" (443). However, Payne makes this statement after using other musicians as primary references who have the same accusations leveled against them, their victims just

were not taken as seriously for whatever reason. While a very good resource, and perhaps the best current retrospective on this era, Payne scrubs clean a lot of dirt which gives the effect of attempting to obscure the shadows that were very much alive and well in this scene, revealing the bias and misogyny still woven into this era. To truly maintain the relevance of third wave emo, it is not enough to have a reckoning, the true story must be told and the voices of the victimized must be uplifted, not ignored for the sake of narrative.

Hayley Williams, Paramore

Hayley Williams is the only major female artist from the 3rd wave emo scene. While there were a few women playing in emo bands in this era, they usually occupied a "secondary" role such as playing keys, and this wave of emo was boys' club. As Jessica Hooper puts it, "[it] is a genre, a scene, made by and for boys" (259). Paramore was the only female fronted emo band able to make the mainstream crossover, even in emo's most mainstream era. Williams and her friends started playing music together in early high school, influenced partly by 2nd wave emo bands (Payne 389). The band formed in 2004, after the mainstream success of 3rd wave emo had been. This combined with the fact that they were 14-15 years old when they started seriously playing and flatly could not get into local venues means that their DIY development was different from other bands in this scene. However, they did have to work harder than any other band to be taken seriously because they had a girl singer. On the first Warped Tour Paramore played the "Shiragirl Stage" which Williams describes as "a truck that had a flatbed on it. It was so flimsy it would shake and fall apart" (Payne 282), adding "[t]here might have been one other female in a band [on tour]" (282). Despite these initial setbacks, the musicianship of the band and Williams incredible vocals shone through clearly and they skyrocketed in popularity. After the release of their first album *All We Know is Falling* in 2007 until 2010, Paramore had six songs in the billboard top 100. Additionally, their first three albums all ranted in the top 15, with the highest peaking at #2.

When Paramore started out, there were many rumors of them being an industry plant, and just being a jumping off point for Williams' solo career (Payne 385). There was some evidence for this, from the way their contract was written and the fact that they didn't have the same DIY background as most emo bands. However, other later 3rd wave bands like Panic! At the Disco also didn't have that background, and I found no evidence of them facing those same type of rumors. This thought was so pervasive that they began selling t-shirts early on that just said "Paramore Is a Band" to jokingly emphasize that they were a band, working together as equal collaborators.

The talent of the band is undeniable, but part of what likely aided their popularity was how Williams was able toe a difficult line of androgyny – the tomboy and the girl-next-door

all at once. As the front person of Shiragirl and the stage organizer, Shira Yeven put it, “Hayley was just one of the guys” (Payne 283). Williams was able fit herself into the boys’ club by looking like a girl but acting more like a guy. Journalist and author, Maria Sherman commented on this boy-ish behavior on stage, saying “[i]t’s interesting to watch how [Williams] performs bodily, even early on. You would see her do the thing where one leg in bent up on a monitor and the other one is stretched out; it’s like, manspreading onstage, right?...It’s not a conventionally feminine way to perform. As this tiny, powerful woman, she was sort of mimicking what dudes were doing, occupying space that way” (Payne 283).

Being a girl did not make Williams immune to instances of internalized misogyny though, as is nearly always the case when you need to be “one of the boys.” When you are a woman who wants to be doing what the boys are doing, you have got to act like them, which means going along with the misogyny they might engage in. You set yourself up as the exception to their rules because you are not like those other girls. However, this impulse manifests in wildly ranging degrees, and in general, William’s seemed to engage with this minimally, with the notable exception in their most popular single, “Misery Business." In this song, Williams describes another girl “stealing” the boy she’s interested in, but Williams has been able to win him back because she is different from the typical girl she is speaking to in the song. While that is a misogynistic theming, part of what has aged poorly is the lyric Williams sings to the other girl; “Once a whore, you’re nothing more, I’m sorry, that’ll never change.” Since the song’s release in 2007, Williams has commented on growing up and realizing the problems with this sentiment (Andrew). Paramore stopped playing the song for a few years starting in 2017, though they had started omitting the word “whore” for several years before that. It was returned to the setlist in 2022 due to audience demand and after the song became wildly popular on TikTok (Milner).

Over the past few years, Williams has broken away from Paramore to release two albums as a solo artist. These albums, like the most recent two Paramore albums, move away from the emo roots into more experimental pop. There is still a raw emotionality in the lyrics, but the music has steadily shifted into something else. However, in Williams’s most recent album “Ego Death at a Bachelorette Party,” she reflects on her time in Paramore and address the insidious misogyny and the demands it put on her in the song Hard: “I got married once in combat boots and/ Only listened to testosterone music/ I had to kill my feminine just to do it.” Ironically, in a scene full of men playing with androgyny and defying mainstream expectations by adopting feminine things from eyeliner to emotionality, the only prominent women felt she had to kill off those same attributes in herself to achieve the success she has reached.

Conclusion

The early 2000s created the perfect environment for emo music to cross over to the mainstream. The rise of the internet allowed people from these strong local emo scenes to connect to each other and build national support for their favorite local bands. The national feeling of vulnerability and disillusionment, especially in younger people during the Bush administration, also helped build a culture wanting these feelings reflected at them. This wave also had all the drawback in the culture of the time, especially rampant misogyny. The scene claimed to be a place for all the outsiders, all the kids who never had a place could go, and in the moment at a good emo show, it does feel like that. But when examining the facts of the scene, it is clear this sentiment is not equally extended to all potential outsiders. Some parts of the scene had more aesthetic androgyny, and while one of the largest bands of this group, My Chemical Romance, seemed to stick to the ideology of acceptance, most others who subverted typical gender expectations for men still engaged in plenty of casual misogyny. At its worst, this culture of misogyny led to the harboring of men using their emotional expressiveness to manipulate and groom teenage girls. That rampant misogyny also meant that for a girl to get successful in the scene, she would have to "kill [her] feminine" just to do it. While there has generally been a more progressive push in the most recent two waves of emo, especially with LGBTQ+ acceptance, these 3rd wave problems still exist to a certain degree. My hope is that discussion of this history can lead to awareness and accountability so that the reported ideals of acceptance and community can be held as equally true for everyone in the contemporary community. While progress has been made, there is still history to learn from, and it is fully worth the effort; despite all the flaws, there is something truly exceptional about going to an emo show. Whether you are in a basement or a stadium, it feels like a communal experience, not just with the rest of the audience, but with the band too. When you sing along, you don't feel like you're singing at the band, you feel like you're singing with them. We've all felt like this, and no one is alone.

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