

Ileana Quintano
April 25, 2008
Fan Culture –Prof. B. Rehak

“Boys Don’t Cry”: The Search for Masculinity within the Indie Rock Community

The Indie scene has drawn as much scorn and derision as it has ardent followers, a large portion of which consists of young men whose styles range from the sensitive poet to the effeminate youth to the androgyne. Drawing upon John Sellers’s autobiography entitled *Perfect From Now: How Indie Rock Saved My Life* and a solicited e-mail account of his attraction to the indie rock community obligingly sent by my friend, and self-professed indie kid, Will, this paper will attempt to show why some young men are drawn to the indie rock community by their desire to embrace a masculinity they feel is not accepted in the mainstream.

The path to indie rock began for Will and Sellers with feelings of isolation and oppression from the mainstream culture. Laura Lee Davies, in her article on the indie rock and new lads community, writes that the mainstream tends to have a “cattle-market mentality” that proves appealing to more self-confident teenagers.¹ Sellers echoes this idea of confidence being a factor in mainstream participation when he writes that he was “too wimpy” to listen to anything besides Sammy Hagar.² His disinterest, however, in the mainstream stemmed not from confidence in himself, but rather lack thereof: to not like the songs playing on Top 40 radio, to conspicuously stand out in any way, invited unwanted attention and ridicule from the popular crowd; straying from the mainstream should be avoided at all cost. Will shares a similar experience with Sellers, writing that

¹ Laura Lee Davies. “Velocity Girls: Indie, New Lads, Old Values”. In *Girls! Girls! Girls! Essays on Women and Music*. Ed. Sarah Cooper (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 125.

² John Sellers. *Perfect From Now On: How Indie Rock Saved My Life*. (Simon & Schuster: New York, 2007), 38.

“only the cool kids seemed to be all in with the mainstream...I tried to get into it just to avoid their jeers, but it was a world that never really fit me”.³ To Will and Sellers, the mainstream, which was “propped-up, privileged, immediately popular, and never misunderstood”, was an alien world, one to which they knew they did not belong.⁴

Anyone who has survived the trials of junior high and high school have their fair share of horror stories in which they could not step foot inside the school without being bowled over by the avalanche of insults hurled their way; such an experience can only add to a teen’s sense of exclusion. Will and Sellers can attest to these daily scenes of teenage torture. Sellers tells of his school days when he spent most of his class time dodging remarks such as “Move it, queer”.⁵ “I didn’t wear the right clothes...I couldn’t figure out which bands to like...I told my friend I liked the Goo Goo Dolls, and he called me a fag,” Will lamented in his e-mail. As evident by the use of the pejoratives “queer” and “fag”, the brunt of these attacks focused on their masculinity and called into question their heterosexuality, a tactic that would not endear many to the dominant popular culture.

Against a seemingly impenetrable mainstream, the indie scene provided them with an alternative masculinity that suited their needs. Davies writes of indie male artists as epitomizing “wimpy geekiness,” and their lyrics as “seemingly feminine, or certainly less macho [in] nature...more domestic and openly vulnerable”.⁶ Theirs are the words of the downtrodden sensitive poet. Thousands of teen boys listened to Morrissey sing “You go home, you cry, and you want to die,” and nodded their heads because Morrissey got it

³ Will Chao. Correspondence via E-mail.

⁴ Sellers, 28.

⁵ Sellers, 50.

⁶ Davies, 125, 128.

right, at least for them. It did not matter that he was a waif of man, tossing roses at his audience members regardless of their sex. Sexuality is irrelevant in the indie scene.⁷

Will concurs, writing that “no one cares if Morrissey is gay or not...All I cared about were his lyrics—they reached out to me, made me realize it was okay to be a guy and have feelings.” For Will, the realization that being a guy does not have to preclude a capacity for emotions, and vice versa, was groundbreaking.

The allure these indie artists have when it comes to girls further validates the legitimacy of the indie masculine alternative. Masculinity, in this sense then, does not mean so much the manner in which you convey your attitudes or behavior as a member of the male gender, but, rather, one’s masculinity is defined as, and confirmed by, how attractive you are to women. What mainstream masculinity and the indie masculinity pursued by Will and Sellers have in common is the equating masculinity with heterosexuality; they differ in the approaches they take. In an industry consisting mainly of males aging from the late teens to early thirties, one has to admit that it would be hard not to think in terms of sex, no matter the depth of the subculture. When recounting the ultimate reason for his induction into the indie community, Sellers succinctly sums up his reasons in one line: “I blame girls.”⁸ And so Sellers embarks on, without exaggeration, three chapters on how girls were the main impetus for his coming to and staying in the indie fan community: from buying a copy of New Order’s *Substance* to trying to pen an insipid verse or two, the desire for female attention controlled every move Seller’s made

⁷ Davies, 128.

⁸ Sellers, 53.

in the indie community: “If baby wants bleeding wrists, baby gets bleeding wrists...I found that I could be and do it all.”⁹

Will, noting how his female friends would swoon over images of Morrissey and Sufjan Stevens, came to the realization that he could also “bag a girl” using his burgeoning poetic talent: “Look at Morrissey with his oversized bobble-head! He writes a few sloppy lines of poetry, and the girls go crazy...I could do that too! And probably bag the head cheerleader in the process.” Never mind physical appearance: that’s a concern for those in the mainstream; for Will, the indie community transcends such superficiality. Instead, the focus falls on talent, specifically of the literary variety, and appearance takes the back seat. An emphasis on words and the expression of intimate feelings usually becomes aligned with femininity, especially within the mainstream culture, with the possible exception of rap. However, any sensitivity within rap lyrics is immediately off set by the hardened appearance of the rapper himself: many write off sentimental moments as the rapper going “soft”. What drew Will to the indie community was that it was already soft. He could stand on stage, gangly form hunched over a microphone, reading excerpts from his diary, and be guaranteed that girls in the audience were plotting ways to lure him home with them.

There are complications with the rough sketch provided above, and the matter is further complicated by the fact that while there is a substantial amount of material on women within music fandoms, there appears to be a slight dearth of literature when it comes to men. By no means is the above meant to be a definitive account of the popularity of the indie scene among young men. There are many paths down that road, and, in these two instances, they started from the same gate: a feeling of seclusion from

⁹ Sellers, 60.

the mainstream culture pervasive at their schools. With their identities under attack, Will and Sellers found comfort in the indie scene where the men did not fit the mainstream mold, yet were still accepted as masculine figures capable of attaining female advances. Of course, this can be seen as causing a problematic conflation of masculinity with heterosexuality, an argument with a scope that exceeds the four page limit set for this paper. Instead, I would like to end with Will's own concluding remark: "I know it's cliché to talk about how music saved your life, but, really, if not physically, then yes, spiritually I would have been dead... I just wouldn't be the man I am today."

Bibliography

E-mail correspondence with Will Chang, 4/19/2008.

Davies, Laura Lee. "Velocity Girls: Indie, New Lads, Old Values". In *Girls! Girls! Girls! Essays on Women, Gender, and Music*. Ed. Sarah Cooper (New York University Press: New York, 1996)

Sellers, John. *Perfect From Now On: How Indie Rock Saved My Life*