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## Song of Myself: Autobiography in Pop Music

Kendra Leonard (Loveland, OH)

Many artists draw on personal experience when they create art, and music is no different. Like Tennessee Williams's plays, Hemingway's stories, or Van Gogh's self-portraits, composers and songwriters often include elements of autobiography in their works. Female composers have had to make their way in what was traditionally a male-dominated field, and the ways their innovations have contributed to the world of music are still being explored. How are music and autobiography connected? How do women tell their stories through music, particularly through song? And why might some women be drawn to use music as the medium for their autobiographies?

One reason may have to do with the large platform women have as singer-songwriters and performers of popular music. There are few other traditions where women command such power and can acquire celebrity status: women who use popular music as the outlet to examine their lives and the lives of other women know that, if they are successful, they will have a large audience to hear what they have to say. Though some female performers are pushed on stage and into careers because of their looks, others turn that exploitation into opportunity and enjoy careers that celebrate their unique perspective. Beyoncé, for example, far from relying on the clichéd tropes of break-ups and best friends, has instead stood up for feminism and her rights as a woman in the music industry at the [2014 MTV Video Music Awards](#) with her celebrated "Feminist" [backdrop and message](#).

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*Beyoncé declares herself a feminist at the 2014 VMAs.*

Avid readers can probably think of several female pop artists who have employed autobiography in their work: [Madonna](#), [Amy Winehouse](#), [Britney Spears](#), [Salt N Pepa](#), [Miley Cyrus](#), [Mariah Carey](#), [Joanna Newsom](#), [Christina Aguilera](#), [Avril Lavigne](#), [Gwen Stefani](#), [Tina Turner](#), [Courtney Love](#), [Petula Clark](#), [Marianne Faithfull](#), [Loretta Lynn](#), [Dolly Parton](#), [Carole King](#), [P!nk](#), and many others.

Fans of P!nk know that she's been singing about her life since the beginning of her career. Although her first album, *Can't Take Me Home* (2000), was not very personal, her second, *M!\$\$undazt00d* (2002), chronicled her anxiety and depression as a teenager ("[Don't Let Me Get Me](#)"), her parents' separation ("[Family Portrait](#)"), her own drug abuse ("[Just Like a Pill](#)"), and the effect her father's service in Vietnam had on the family ("[My Vietnam](#)"). In "Don't Let Me Get Me," P!nk describes the pressure to be like the other girls in pop, naming Britney Spears as her opposite, singing, "She's so pretty / that's just not me." P!nk continued to establish herself as outside of the music business's image factory with *Try This* (2003), but was less successful in doing so, stating that her studio wanted an instant hit and was less interested in her desire to write and sing personally meaningful songs.<sup>1</sup>

Convincing her studio that her personal journey—expressed through pop, R&B, country, alternative rock, and other genres—was what her fans wanted and what she intended to do, P!nk released *I'm Not Dead* in 2007. The songs on that album document her feminist politics and her dislike of using pop stars as role models for young women (“[Stupid Girls](#)”); the death of a friend from a drug overdose (“[Who Knew](#)”); and her conflicting feelings about being in a long-term relationship (“[Leave Me Alone \(I'm Lonely\)](#)”). The album ends with a hidden track of P!nk and her father singing about his experiences in and since serving in Vietnam (“[I Have Seen the Rain](#)”). In her two subsequent albums, *Funhouse* (2008) and *The Truth About Love* (2012), P!nk has continued to chronicle her life in song. “[So What](#)” from *Funhouse* was written in response to a separation from her husband, and in “[Good Old Days](#)” on *The Truth About Love* she sings about their reconciliation, marriage, and her pregnancy with their daughter.

Throughout her career, P!nk has used a variety of musical genres to tell the stories of her life, and it's clear from sales and awards that fans and critics alike appreciate her nerve and honesty in dealing with the good and bad equally well through song. That she can mix and use genres that don't always overlap much in the music business, such as R&B and country, suggests that the one element that stays constant in her work—her inclusion of autobiographical material—may be one important key to her success.

Loretta Lynn's work in honky-tonk and country provide an interesting counterpoint to P!nk's more contemporary output. Lynn grew up in rural Kentucky, where life was often marked by poverty, lung disease, alcoholism, and malnutrition. Lynn married when she was just 14 and had her first child soon thereafter. At 17 she began playing the guitar and was soon on her way to country music stardom. (One of her sisters also became a famous country singer under the name Crystal Gayle.) Her songs—about her blue-collar roots and growing up poor in the Appalachians—act both as autobiography and political manifesto. Though her first hits weren't particularly personal, her career took off with the recording of “[Coal Miner's Daughter](#),” in which she sings about being one of eight children, about her father working multiple jobs and her mother taking in laundry to support the family, about how the family would sell livestock to get money for clothes and household goods, and that despite those hardships, she was proud of how her family survived.

Although Lynn's songs were emphatically country in terms of their style, instrumentation, and harmony, she often sang about subjects other country singers normally wouldn't touch. In 1966, after a number of her friends had lost their husbands in Vietnam, Lynn protested the war in “[Dear Uncle Sam](#),” an act unheard of in the country music community. Her 1971 song “[One's on the Way](#)” compared the life of an overburdened mother in rural America—a life she herself knew well—with the glamorous lives of Hollywood stars. The next year she tackled double standards for divorced men and women in “[Rated X](#).” In 1975, she wrote and recorded “[The Pill](#),” about birth control and her—and other women's—ability to manage their own reproductive health. Having given birth to two children before age 19 in an era when birth control wasn't widely available, Lynn knew a lot about the desire for bodily autonomy. Many radio stations thought the content was too racy to play on air, but because of this, the song—and the birth control pill—got a lot of press, and years later, Lynn told the story of how doctors in poor areas thanked her for educating their patients through her music. Other songs told of Lynn's husband's infidelity (“[You Ain't Woman Enough \(To Take My Man\)](#)”), alcoholism (“[Don't Come Home A-Drinkin'](#)”), their fights, and reconciliations. Her 2000 song “[I Can't Hear the Music](#)” mourns his death and remembers their life together. In addition

to the many autobiographical narratives in her music, Lynn has also written several books about her life.

While many male singers of Lynn's generation sang about their bad behavior ("A Week in a Country Jail," "The Fightin' Side of Me"), brief relationships ("If We Make It through December," "She's Actin' Single (I'm Drinkin' Doubles)"), alcohol abuse ("Devil in the Bottle," "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights"), and idealized, stereotyped women ("Good Hearted Woman," "Cherokee Maiden"), Lynn was singing about politics, social inequality, and ways to improve the lives of the women she sang for. Today, P!nk's male competitors on the Top 20 charts almost never venture outside of their primary genres the way she does, and rarely address autobiographical topics. Thus both Lynn and P!nk have written and sung songs on topics and in ways that are "outside of the box" of what the music industry assumed would be their primary audiences, and challenged the status quo in terms of cross-genre audiences and singing about the personal and political. In bringing their own lives into their lyrics and performances, they were able to take control of their own stories and identities in ways other female singers have not. Both women fully represent themselves in their music.

So what happens when a woman is represented by music written by someone else? That's what we'll cover in my next blog, on music and gender in Star Wars and other screen works.

### **For Discussion**

What other female artists express themselves autobiographically in their music?

How is autobiographical music received by fans? What about by critics?

What controversial topics might a singer-songwriter like Loretta Lynn tackle today?

<sup>1</sup> Brian Boyd, "Pink Panther," The Irish Times, November 2006.