

## Why are only women described as ‘confessional’ singer-songwriters?

The term is loaded with notions of guilt and remorse – and it is rarely ever used about men

Alexandra Pollard

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With every hour that Joni Mitchell spent in intensive care earlier this month, and with every hour her fans held their breath, braced for the worst, another (premature) tribute made its way online. And almost every one featured a term that is surely Mitchell’s least favourite description of herself: “confessional singer.”

Make the mistake of calling her that to her face, and you will likely suffer the full force of Mitchell’s contempt – as biographer Michelle Mercer discovered while writing her 2009 book *Will You Take Me As I Am*. Mitchell said that being placed in that category by Mercer was “as close as someone could come” to calling her the N-word.

Such offensive turns of phrase led Canadian musician Dave Bidini to write an open letter to Mitchell last year, in which he lamented the “mean, harsh, angry, unfeeling things” she has said in recent years. But the explanation that followed was more nuanced.

“When I think of confession,” Mitchell said, “two things come to mind. The swinging light and the billy club – trying to get a confession out of somebody that’s been captured. Confess, confess! Or a witch hunt. Or trials. Confession is somebody trying to beat something out of you externally. You’re imprisoned. You’re captured. They’re trying to get you to admit something. To humiliate and degrade yourself and put yourself in a bad position.”

She continued: “Then there’s the voluntary confession of Catholicism, where you go to this window and you talk to this priest and tell him that you’re having sexual fantasies and he’s wanking on the other side of the window. That’s the only two kinds of confession I know – voluntary and under duress – and I am not confessing.”

Still, the term has dogged Mitchell since she began making music in the 1960s. It has also been attached to most female solo musicians in her wake. But why has a word that once applied to a specific literary genre become so reductive and heavily gendered when applied to music? And why do we consider a term that in any other context, be it legal or religious, is imbued with a sense of guilt and shame, to be specifically female?

Emmy the Great, whose live show has been described by The Line of Best Fit as “almost unbearably confessional, as if she’s reciting pages from her own diary”, has reservations that echo those of Mitchell. “The music industry is a place where wild assumptions are made about female artists,” she says, “based on very little other than appearance and society’s existing pigeonholes. A male singer-songwriter might play on the same themes as a female singer-songwriter and it may end up being assumed that the girl is singing from her diary, and the boy is making statements on the big themes of life.”

She cites Frank Ocean as a rare example of a male musician to whom the confessional label is attached. But his debut solo album, *Channel Orange*, only really began to be described as such after he published a blog post about falling in love with a man, which seems to imply that his truth is also, somehow, something to be ashamed of.

“I don’t think I like it as a term,” says Marika Hackman, who released her debut album *We Slept At Last* earlier this year. “I think the word ‘confession’ is so wrapped up in guilt and sin, like you’ve done something wrong and you want to tell everyone about it because it’s bursting out of you, you’ve got to try and atone for it. I don’t think anyone writes music for that purpose. I certainly write personal music, but I also feel that by the time the song’s a finished product I’ve abstracted them enough that it’s not this raw, personal thing any more, I’m protecting myself from that – so I would never say that I was writing confessional music.”

St Vincent, never one to let lazy assumptions slide, balked at the word in a recent interview with *i-D* magazine. “I feel like sometimes when people describe music as confessional, it’s a term that they relegate to female artists,” she said. “I don’t often hear it in relation to men. And I think there’s something slightly pejorative about the term ... it presupposes – in a kind of sexist way – this idea that’s ingrained in culture that women lack the imagination to write about anything other than their exact literal lives. And that’s not true.”

When poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton began writing poetry revulsion. “I feel that I have, without right or desire, been made a third party to her conversations with her psychiatrist. It is painful, embarrassing and irritating,” wrote the reviewer Charles Gullans of Sexton’s 1966 collection *Live or Die*. “The personal character of the confessional detail is embarrassing, and the tone of hysterical melodrama which pervades most of the writing is finally irritating.” There’s something of the “calm down dear” in that assessment, which is notable for managing to cram so many insultingly gendered terms into so few words. And similar sentiments are being projected on to female musicians today.

While women are often assumed to be more emotional and sensitive than men, they have also traditionally operated within a private, domestic sphere. As such they have had to work harder to externalise their thoughts – to prove them worthy of public consumption.

In the end, the issue is not with the word itself, but the way it is used by critics to categorise female musicians and make assumptions about both their lyrics and desires. As Emmy the Great says, that “means they’re not fucking listening at all”.

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