A moment’s pleasure, a lasting treasure: Feminism in 1960s girl group music and its cover versions

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Girl group music was one of the defining musical sounds of America in the early
1960s. Many songs originally recorded by girl groups and their soloist peers are some
of the most prolifically covered works in the Anglophone pop music world. In addition,
scholars such as Jacqueline Warwick and Susan J. Douglas have discussed the
potential for feminist readings of the genre and the important role it played in the lives
of its teenage female listeners. This thesis contributes to the growing field of
 scholarship on girl group music that argues it should be afforded greater significance
in popular music history, as mainstream music criticism has discounted and dismissed
the genre for decades.

Building on the comprehensive study of feminism in girl group music achieved by
scholars like Warwick, I identify two songs that represent contrasting aspects of the
genre’s feminist potential and explore them in greater detail. The girl group song most
widely recognised as a feminist anthem is Lesley Gore’s 1963 single ‘You Don’t Own
Me’, whose lyrics reject the decorative, subservient role that young women were
expected to seek and embrace in their romantic lives. In contrast, a less overtly
feminist song is ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’, first recorded in 1960 by the Shirelles
and notable for expressing complex feelings on the prospect of consummating a
relationship from the perspective of a teenage girl. Amidst the then-repressive
gender roles foisted on teenage girls in the early 1960s, young women performing
these rebellious lyrics held empowering potential for teenage female listeners.

In this thesis, I investigate the original recordings of these two songs as well as
several of their cover versions. The selected interpretations of ‘Will You Love Me
Tomorrow’ all belong to the girl group genre, allowing comparison of more subtle
stylistic differences, while I explore the legacy of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ over a longer
time period to understand how its universally powerful lyrics have been treated in
different contexts. I analyse how these recordings construct meaning through musical
elements such as instrumentation, studio production and vocal technique, combined
with visual elements such as music videos and live performance. In my exploration of
these factors from a critical feminist perspective, I argue that both subtle and striking
variations on the original recordings can have a significant impact on what an
interpretation expresses about gender, and that applying a similar lens to other widely
covered songs can facilitate important contributions to the field of popular music
studies.
Introduction

In this thesis, I explore two songs from the 1960s girl group era that have each been recorded by over one hundred artists: ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’, written by Carole King and Gerry Goffin and originally recorded by the Shirelles (1960), and ‘You Don’t Own Me’, written by John Madara and David White and originally recorded by Lesley Gore (1963).¹ ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ was covered many times in the first few years after its release, including by several other girl groups. In contrast, ‘You Don’t Own Me’ has garnered many covers over a longer period of time and a larger variety of genres.² Some of the songs’ most popular covers are well-known in their own right, such as Carole King’s recording of ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ or Grace and G-Eazy’s recording of ‘You Don’t Own Me’, while others are more obscure.³ These songs have been interpreted in so many musical styles that one could listen to fifty different versions of each and never hear an inkling of the girl group sound. Despite this, I argue that their origins in girl group music are what gives them their feminist power, and that this power deserves further study. In Chapter 1, I investigate how five different recordings of ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ helped make it a significant soundtrack to the lives of many teenage girls in the 1960s. In Chapter 2, I discuss and evaluate how the message of empowerment and independence in the lyrics of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ is interpreted across selected points in the song’s legacy. To provide context for these analyses, I first examine the topics of cover versions, girl group music, and interpretation more generally.

³ Carole King’s recording can be classified as both an original song and a cover, as King wrote the music but The Shirelles recorded it first; Carole King, ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow,’ track 9 on Tapestry, Spotify, Ode Records, 1971; Grace featuring G-Eazy, ‘You Don’t Own Me,’ Spotify, RCA Records, 2015.
Cover versions: rebirth or revival?

The diversity of human experience means that no two people respond to a piece the same way, whether they engage with it only as a listener or additionally as a performer. It can be said of Western art music that there is limited room for interpretation because so much is dictated by the score; as Lawrence Kramer notes in his book *Why Classical Music Still Matters*, ‘Unlike performers in popular traditions, classical performers cannot partly recompose the music in the act of playing it. Some limited exceptions aside, they cannot vary the music, embellish it freely, change its melodic shape, abridge it, expand it, change its tempo or instrumentation or harmony. They have to play the notes in the score.’ But, as Kramer and others now recognise, even within the strictures of this genre, performers still have the agency to affect the meaning of the piece through interpretive choices. As Richard Taruskin argues, even in something as canonical as Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, conductors and performers cannot help but ‘[recast] tradition in contemporary terms and according to contemporary taste’ in each performance. In this sense, there is no one platonic ideal of interpretation, despite the unchanging nature of the score. Moreover, there are situations that warrant making a conscious attempt to reinterpret Western art music. A typical example of this is when an opera company announces a new production of a historical work rife with racism or misogyny and makes substantial changes to the dramatic elements of the source material in an effort to lessen these ‘problematic’ aspects.

Kramer was right about popular music; musicians wanting to create their own interpretation of a pop song tend to have much more to work with. The defining characteristics that make the source material recognisable can vary from song to song, and

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they rarely include the instrumental arrangement or vocal delivery of the original performance. Tribute acts notwithstanding, musicians invariably add elements of their signature musical style when they interpret a song that was originally performed by somebody else. Performances that are intended to reproduce other performances are no less deserving of discussion, but in this thesis, I wish to focus on interpretations that inevitably, and often purposefully, alter the source material. This concept is especially pertinent to a genre like girl group music, where the importance assigned to notions of authenticity and originality is less than in genres like folk and rock 'n' roll. As I discuss below, this idea is part of why a virtuosic guitar solo or deeply personal lyric is often inextricably associated with the one fabled musician that created it, while a conventional pop song written by a team of songwriters often gets treated as more of a blank slate. With this in mind, it's no wonder that girl group music has inspired such a vast volume of cover versions.

The cover version is an integral, albeit complicated, part of popular music history. The term was initially understood by journalist Will Leonard in a 1952 issue of the Chicago Daily Tribune as music industry jargon for the product of a record label hoping to capitalise on the popularity of another label’s song. From a musicological perspective, however, the concept of a cover is about much more than just making money. The interpretation of a cover version is just as significant as the original song, if not more, in determining what meaning can be read into the performance. The singer's vocal choices in a cover are a significant and easily recognisable factor in how that version creates new meaning, while the ancillary nature of instrumental accompaniment means that its impact is recognised in a different way. Pop music instrumentation can be broken down into four aspects. The first is which instruments are present, and the second is the basic details of the notes the musicians are instructed to play, such as pitch, rhythm, tonality and chord progressions. The third is the mixing and production, wherein a producer decides whether the sound of an instrument should be prominent and defined, misted ethereally in the background, or anything in between. The fourth, and the most significant in my research, is performance style. Differences in technique can have a tremendous effect on the meaning and mood

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that a performance communicates. For example, a cellist playing a one-octave scale with smooth, *legato* bow strokes conjures an entirely different character than if they play it in a short, *spiccato* bowing style instead. Vocal and instrumental performance decisions are far from the only changes that can be made: the acts of interpretation inherent to cover versions can also take the form of alterations to the lyrics, visual aesthetics, narrative framing and cultural context, amongst many others. In making these modifications, no matter how subtle or striking, a musician creates a performance that means something new.

Popular music scholarship has explored cover versions in several ways. Musicologist Dai Griffiths discusses the malleability of identity in cover versions that ‘involve crossings, movements and comparisons’. For example, a male singer creates a different sexual identity when he covers a female singer’s record without rewriting lyrics that express attraction to a man. Griffiths also indicates that the topic of covers is ‘rich enough to lead in many directions’. In her investigation of the concept of a canon of rock music, musicologist Carys Wyn Jones defines covers as a potent type of ‘secondary material’: ‘Each new articulation of a song adds another layer of intertextual meaning … Covers demonstrate a way in which albums are open to multiple readings and reinterpretation, vital to the generation of secondary material.’ These concepts of identity and multiple readings are central to my study of ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ and ‘You Don’t Own Me.’ In Chapter 1, I discuss how nuances of instrumentation and vocal performance create different expressions of sexuality within a consistently heterosexual teenage female identity, and in Chapter 2, I explore the new narratives and layers of meaning that are created when a song is covered in significantly different contexts. In contrast with the cross-sectional approach that Griffiths and Jones have taken, however, this thesis focuses on just two songs and a greater number of covers of each. I argue that this kind of longitudinal study can not only contribute to a more detailed understanding of how cover versions can affect meaning, but also help redress a kind of critical marginalisation. We need to study the songs that

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musicians have chosen to reimagine over and over again—especially those that originated in a still-marginalised genre like 1960s girl group music.

**Resonating with the girl group sound**

The two songs explored in this thesis share not only a place of origin in the girl group genre, but also an ideological link in their representation of feminist ideas and values in the often-underrepresented perspective of the teenage girl. This has been recognised to different extents: as I will discuss in Chapter 2, ‘You Don’t Own Me’ has been widely adopted as a feminist anthem for decades, whereas the validation of teenage girls’ anxieties and emotions in ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ has only been reclaimed and celebrated by musicologists and feminist scholars more recently. Detailed research into 1960s girl group music exists primarily within the relatively new interdisciplinary field of girl studies, which explores the experience of girlhood and girls as a social group.¹⁰ Musicologist Jacqueline Warwick’s book *Girl Groups, Girl Culture* is one of these rich interdisciplinary resources, offering a comprehensive definition of girl group music that has informed the following explanation.

Girl group music is a genre of popular music that reached the height of its popularity in the early 1960s. The singers are young women, often but not always performing in a group, and there is often some kind of dialogue between the lead singer and the backing singers. These interactions add layers of meaning to a song, usually supporting the perspective expressed by the lead singer implicitly through non-verbal scat syllables or explicitly through additional lyrics. Girl bands, whose members play their own instruments and don’t strictly present an adolescent image, are excluded from this definition. Conversely, Warwick considers solo artists like Lesley Gore and Little Eva part of the genre due to the hallmarks of the girl group sound that can be heard in their music. Its recordings originate from studio sessions rather than live improvised performances, and its instrumentation tends to be more extensive than that of a typical 1960s rock ’n’ roll studio session, often featuring orchestral string instruments (violin, viola, cello, double bass, and occasionally harp). The songs are typically written and arranged by professional songwriters and

producers, and their lyrics tend to be about the everyday passions and worries of teenage girls: strict parents, fun parties, and the ever-confusing world of teenage boys.\textsuperscript{11}

Rephrasing a few of these qualities illuminates some of the common reasons that girl groups and their songs are criticised as shallow or written off as anti-feminist. In the eyes of a detractor, Warwick’s summary of the genre’s instrumental, compositional and narrative characteristics mutates into ‘They couldn’t play their own instruments, and they didn’t write their own songs—and what vapid, superficial, boy-crazy songs they sang!’ Indeed, the singers in a girl group don’t demonstrate any technical instrumental skill or virtuosity, and for the most part they’re not singing songs they composed themselves, which supposedly robs the music of authenticity. Additionally, they’re singing stuff that reflects the repressive gender roles of the time, including the importance placed on finding a boyfriend. And most importantly, they’re teenage girls, a demographic that society is historically reluctant to take seriously. Susan J. Douglas, in the chapter ‘Why the Shirelles Mattered’ from her book \textit{Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media}, quotes a typical criticism from \textit{The Rolling Stone History of Rock & Roll}: ‘The female group of the early 1960s served to drive the concept of art completely away from rock ’n’ roll...I feel this genre represents the low point in the history of rock ’n’ roll.’\textsuperscript{12} It can be easy to see why girl group music might be so readily dismissed in a culture that values and rewards both virtuosity and authenticity in music, but this genre is important because it gave teenage girls a reflection and validation of their lived experiences. Douglas recognises this significance in ‘Why the Shirelles Mattered’: ‘Even though the girl groups were produced and managed by men, it was in their music that the contradictory messages about female sexuality and rebelliousness were most poignantly and authentically expressed. In the early 1960s, pop music became the one area of popular culture in which adolescent female voices could be clearly heard.’\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{11} Warwick, ix.
\textsuperscript{13} Douglas, 87.
\end{flushright}
Another reason this genre deserves more acclaim is that an impressive number of girl group songs showcase a finely-honed pop songwriting craft. This was partly a result of high demand, put into motion by ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ giving girl group music its first chart-topping hit; when the girl group sound started to gain traction, labels needed songs that their newly signed musicians could record and release to cash in on the trend. Songwriters like Gerry Goffin and Carole King flocked to ‘song factories’ like New York’s famous Brill Building to write a profusion of potential songs for girl groups, and in doing so, built an impressive catalogue of hits. The power of a well-constructed pop song, whether it wraps an unforgettable melodic hook around your brain or sends you cavorting towards the nearest dance floor, is often just as underestimated as its cultural value. Many of the cleverly written songs originally recorded by girl groups have been covered extensively, whether by the Beatles in their early years or by punk bands yelling them at 198 beats per minute, and a significant number have featured in movies.  

It is not through skilful composition alone, however, that girl group music has achieved these huge portfolios of covers and permeated the foundations of popular music culture; it’s also through its inherent compassion. To write sincerely and believably about the heartbreaks and joys of teenage girlhood is to practise empathy for teenage girls and take their experiences seriously. As scholars like Douglas and Warwick have argued, girl group music’s reliance on professional songwriters makes it no less meaningful, and the abundance of covers of the two songs I have chosen to discuss indicates how deeply their lyrics have resonated with listeners.  

The many girl group versions of ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ demonstrate how vital it was to teenage girls at the time, while the wealth of feminist causes and female-empowerment narratives that have co-opted and reinterpreted ‘You Don’t Own Me’ over the years demonstrates how vital it has been to women ever since. Taking teenage girls seriously shouldn’t be a radical act, but as I have discussed, a genre they loved has been scorned by pop music criticism and under-represented in scholarship for decades. To continue to undo this academic marginalisation, we need to develop conversations about the music that mattered to teenage girls—and to do that, we need to understand why it mattered.

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14 See the cover version of ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ recorded by Me First and the Gimme Gimmes.
15 Douglas, Where the Girls Are; Warwick, Girl Groups, Girl Culture.
Chapter 1: ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’

In this chapter, I delve into the early history of a celebrated pop song to examine the significance of its origins in the girl group sound. With music by Carole King and lyrics by Gerry Goffin, ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow,’ originally recorded by the Shirelles, was the first song by a black girl group to hit number one in the United States. This success indicates a number of things—the shock factor of the subject material, the increase of white audiences for music made by black musicians, and the promising talent of the writers and performers, amongst others—but I wish to explore one factor in particular. Building on analysis by Warwick and Douglas, I argue that teenage girls latched onto this song because it gave them something they needed: representation and validation of their budding sexuality.

‘What on earth does a girl do?’

Patricia Juliana Smith summarises the early 1960s as a time ‘when heterosexuality was the only visible option, early marriage and motherhood were the rule rather than the exception, unwed pregnancy incurred social stigma, and birth control was ineffectual if not completely inaccessible.’\(^1\) The United States was yet to experience the sexual revolution that blossomed in the late 1960s and the second-wave feminism movement of the 1970s; early 1960s American society inherited the conservatism of the 1950s, imposing restrictive gender roles that placed teenage girls in a moral and behavioural vice. The pressure to marry young translated to pressure to acquire a steady boyfriend in adolescence, and the path to this coveted prize was filled with confusion.

An example of how this confusion was propagated can be found in an issue of 16 Magazine from 1964, in an article that allows readers to ‘eavesdrop on just the kind of conversation that would go on between two of the top teen-queens of them all—those two lovelies,

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Lesley Gore and Connie Francis—when it came to discussing the “stronger sex,” namely BOYS! Consider the following excerpts:

CONNIE: “[You] really have to use psychology on a boy. It’s not easy to convince him that you are ‘prettied up’ to please him, and that you can’t help it if other boys notice you, too.”

LESLEY: “We might as well get right down to the ‘nitty-gritty’—or plain facts. What on earth does a girl do when she knows her fellow wants to kiss her goodnight, but also knows that if she does start that he will definitely lose respect for her!”

CONNIE: “But Boys! Boys! Boys! are always heartaches and headaches. If a girl will meet her fellow halfway, things are usually pretty smooth—and lots of fun.”

The likelihood of this conversation genuinely occurring as it was printed is microscopic; the phrasing is stilted and didactic, and besides, Francis would have been twenty-six to Gore’s nineteen. However, framing it as an honest, personal conversation between two ‘teen-queens’ lends credence to the perspectives it expresses, effectively schooling teenage girls on the complex social rules of heterosexual courtship. As Warwick writes:

Girls who participate in youth culture and popular music … find themselves in the cross section of two opposing ideologies; on the one hand, they must devise ways of struggling with respectability, and on the other, they belong to a culture that invites experimenting with sexual self-expression. Girls are expected to be pretty enough to attract male attention and societal approval, but they must also be able to suppress their own sexual desires in order to maintain a patriarchal social order.

Teenage girls flocked to listen to girl group records because of how they reflected and validated all of these conflicting feelings. The vocal arrangement of the Chiffons’ ‘Sweet Talkin’ Guy’ captures the tension of wanting someone who has womanising tendencies; the backup singers respond to the lead singer in agreement as she warns listeners off this

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3 ‘BOYS! BOYS! BOYS!’

4 Warwick, Girl Groups, Girl Culture, 145.
kind of guy, but they also join her after the second chorus to lament ‘Why do I love him like I do?’ in harmony. The coexistence of call-and-response and homophonic harmonies showcases the different ways a girl could think and feel whilst in a quandary like this.⁵ The Shirelles’ first single ‘I Met Him On A Sunday’ narrates meeting a boy, pining for him, kissing him, being stood up and breaking up with him, all in the space of a week. The short time frame encapsulates the capriciousness and intensity of teenage emotions, while the way the lyrics are divided between four lead singers creates a sense of shared experience. Countless other girl group songs provided solace to girls struggling with unfamiliar feelings in their individual experiences of heartbreak, infatuation, jealousy or even intimate partner violence.⁶ Douglas champions this feminist power of girl group music with reference to her own memories of the genre in ‘Why the Shirelles Mattered’:

The most important thing about this music, the reason it spoke to us so powerfully, was that it gave voice to all the warring selves inside us struggling, blindly and with a crushing sense of insecurity, to forge something resembling a coherent identity. Even though the girl groups were produced and managed by men, it was in their music that the contradictory messages about female sexuality and rebelliousness were most poignantly and authentically expressed. In the early 1960s, pop music became the one area of popular culture in which adolescent female voices could be clearly heard. They sang about the pull between the need to conform and the often overwhelming desire to rebel, about the tension between restraint and freedom, and about the rewards—and costs—of prevailing gender roles.… By superimposing our own dramas, from our own lives, onto each song, each of us could assume an active role in shaping the song’s meaning. Songs that were hits around the country had very particular associations and meanings for each listener. … We were all alone, but we weren’t really alone at all. In this music, we found solidarity as girls.⁷

‘Can I believe the magic of your sighs?’

On the surface, the dilemma depicted in the lyrics of ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ is straightforward—a girl isn’t sure whether to have sex with her boyfriend—but upon deeper examination, it tells a much more complicated story. Contrasting perspectives are

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⁶ Respective examples are ‘He’s Gone’ by the Chantels, ‘He’s So Fine’ by the Chiffons, ‘Party Lights’ by Claudine Clark, and ‘He Hit Me (It Felt Like A Kiss)’ by the Crystals.
communicated through not only the lyrics, but also the song’s arrangement, its use of backing vocals, and the way its instrumental parts are performed. The song’s complex, multilayered meanings gave it great significance in the lives of teenage girls in the early 1960s—significance that challenges the widely held misconception that girl group music was unfeminist and unimportant.

For easier reference, here are the lyrics and structure of the song in Table 1:

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<th>Lyrics</th>
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<td>Intro</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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| Verse 1 | Tonight you’re mine completely  
          You give your love so sweetly  
          Tonight the light of love is in your eyes  
          But will you love me tomorrow? |
| Verse 2 | Is this a lasting treasure  
          Or just a moment’s pleasure?  
          Can I believe the magic of your sighs?  
          Will you still love me tomorrow? |
| Bridge  | Tonight with words unspoken  
          You say that I’m the only one  
          But will my heart be broken  
          When the night meets the morning sun? |
| Verse 3 | I’d like to know that your love  
          Is love I can be sure of  
          So tell me now and I won’t ask again:  
          Will you still love me tomorrow? |
| Break   | N/A    |
| Coda    | So tell me now and I won’t ask again:  
          Will you still love me tomorrow?  
          Will you still love me tomorrow? |

Table 1: ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ lyrics and structure, transcribed by the author.8

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8 The Shirelles, ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow.’ All musical and lyrical analysis of the Shirelles’ interpretation of this song refers to this recording.
The mixed feelings presented in the lyrics honour the emotional complexity that a teenage girl would experience upon finding herself in a situation like this, a credit to lyricist Gerry Goffin’s ability to put himself in someone else’s shoes. The first line alone is a potent beginning. ‘Tonight you’re mine,’ coos lead singer Shirley Owens, painting a picture of a private, romantic meeting under the stars. There’s a brief pause before the word ‘completely’ unfolds slowly, as if it’s something the narrator wishes to savour. With this, the anticipation subtly escalates; the word choice implies not only a romantic union, but also a physical one. To listeners familiar with the hormonal torment of being a teenage girl, the song has already accurately depicted the experience of emotional and physical desire in a single line. The verse continues to set the scene over a simple major chord progression, and then something interesting happens. King creates a troubled feeling in the third line (‘Tonight the light of love is in your eyes’) by using the non-diatonic chord II to approach the relative minor. With no conflict apparent in the lyrics, the listener is unsure what to make of this sudden harmonic tension, wondering what the problem is—and then the song’s refrain lands, and we suddenly understand the issue. Positioning ‘But will you love me tomorrow?’ on a harmonic resolution at the end of the quatrain signals that this is the all-important question that must be answered before anything can happen. Verse 2 and the bridge flesh out the narrator’s uncertainty, expanding on the doubt she feels (‘Can I believe the magic of your sighs? … Will my heart be broken / When the night meets the morning sun?’) as well as her excitement: ‘Tonight with words…unspoken’ is a slow reveal of sensuality similar to the one we hear in the song’s opening line, and ‘Can I believe the magic of your sighs?’ ends on a surprisingly suggestive homophone.

After all this indecision, how does the night end? In the coda, the refrain repeats over and over again, continuing as the song fades out. This indicates two things: that the narrator is truly uncertain about what to do, and that nothing is going to happen between these two until the question is answered. The latter of these ideas is especially groundbreaking, knowing how teenage girls were expected to defer to the judgment of their male counterparts in contexts platonic and romantic alike. A girl group song entrusting this kind of agency to its narrator was an important step away from that attitude of passivity, empowering teenage female listeners to take on the narrator’s independence and negotiate sexual encounters on their own terms.
The significance of the song’s narrative in a teenage girl’s life cannot be overstated. The spellbound reverence in the lyrics suggests that this might be the first time the protagonist has been in a situation where sex is a real and immediate possibility. As discussed by Warwick and the Gore/Francis ghostwriters of *16 Magazine*, there were social consequences for a girl who was sexually active; the fear of heartbreak mentioned in the bridge may not only refer to losing a loving monogamous relationship, but also becoming the subject of gossip and alienation. The song’s lyrics encapsulate the multifaceted emotions a teenage girl might have at this point in her life, but they don’t achieve this complexity single-handedly. In fact, they’re aided by two powerful voices: those of a violin and cello.

**Tugging at the heartstrings**

Orchestral strings—violin, viola, cello, double bass and harp—are a cornerstone of popular music instrumentation, and many scholars discuss the use of this instrument family in various genres and cultural contexts. Ken McLeod, for example, writes about strings as a part of a symphony orchestra used in disco-classical fusion tracks found in the film *Saturday Night Fever* in his article ‘“A Fifth of Beethoven”: Disco, Classical Music, and the Politics of Inclusion’; John A. Jackson’s book *A House on Fire: The Rise and Fall of Philadelphia Soul* discusses the role of strings as a core part of the fabled Philadelphia sound. Despite this focus, neither text goes into detail about the meaning of orchestral strings as a stand-alone instrumental section, or deals with the topic of performance style. Indeed, this aspect has been largely underexplored in music academia, where it is impossible to find an in-depth, technical discussion of the use of orchestral strings in pop music. Perhaps this is due to what Robert Fink identifies as the historical tendency of popular music scholarship to focus on cultural and sociological research.

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9 Orchestral strings have been used in many genres throughout history—1950s Tin Pan Alley music, 1960s baroque pop (e.g. the Beatles’ ‘Eleanor Rigby’), symphonic rock, soul, disco, R&B—and continue to appear in more recent genres such as indie rock (e.g. Arcade Fire) and electronic/classical crossover (e.g. Clean Bandit, Lindsay Stirling).


The idea of stringed instruments as symbols of sexuality or gender has received more scholarly attention, especially in relation to genres such as rock music, disco and girl group music. In his discussion of masculinity and the electric guitar in his 1999 book *Instruments of Desire*, Steve Waksman examines a 1967 live performance by Jimi Hendrix from a perspective of visual symbolism. ‘The electric guitar as technophallus,’ writes Waksman, ‘represents a fusion of man and machine, an electronic appendage that allowed Hendrix to display his instrumental and, more symbolically, his sexual prowess.’12 This symbolism establishes the electric guitar as a paragon of aggressive, sexualised masculinity. Richard Dyer points out the difference in instrumentation between the ‘phallocentric’, in-your-face guitar of rock ’n’ roll and the lush, romantic strings of disco music in his 1979 article ‘In Defence of Disco’. Dyer identifies romanticism as a conventional characteristic of disco and refers specifically to the use of large violin sections as a way of telegraphing ‘surging, outpouring emotions’.13

To listeners in the 1960s, the mellifluous timbre of orchestral strings denoted the sweetness and refinement of ideal femininity, making them perfectly suited to accompany a girl group. Warwick notes how orchestral strings reflect both the genre’s history and its femininity, ‘hearkening back to Tin Pan Alley conventions and distinguishing these songs from the guitar-based rock of Chuck Berry and Elvis.’14 Similarly, Douglas claims that lyrically suggestive girl group songs being orchestrated ‘with violins instead of with electric guitars or saxophones…muted the sexual explicitness and made it more romantic, more spiritual, more safe.’15 Indeed, orchestral strings are popularly perceived as a less aggressive, less sexual alternative to the hyper-masculinity of the electric guitar—however, the strings in ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ stretch the boundaries of their role in the arrangement, weaving nervous eagerness into the mix from the beginning of the song.

The introduction is composed of gentle guitar chords, a shuffling beat on a drum kit, a simple bassline, piano arpeggios, and a prominent solo cello. While the other instrumental parts are more rhythmically relaxed, the cellist plays a pattern of semiquavers and *staccato* quavers using short, bouncy bow strokes. See Figure 1:

![Cello motif](image)

Figure 1: Cello motif in the introduction of the Shirelles’ recording.\(^{16}\)

The quick underlying rhythm is reminiscent of a fluttering heartbeat, or the imagery of butterflies in one’s stomach due to nervousness. This pattern insistently repeats itself as an *ostinato* throughout the song, its crisp and clear articulation supplanting the more laid-back percussion provided by the drums and underscoring the arrangement with a feeling of excitement.\(^{17}\)

The arrival of the Shirelles’ vocals in the first verse introduces another layer. The youthfulness and lack of professional technique in Shirley Owens’ singing voice informs the characterisation of the song’s narrator.\(^{18}\) These lyrics aren’t the ruminations of a seasoned chanteuse; in Owens’ unassuming alto, it’s as if they’re the genuine thoughts of a teenage girl. The other Shirelles’ voices enter in three-part harmony on a long ‘ah’ as Owens sings ‘Tonight the light of love is in your eyes’, heightening the increased emotional intensity created by the harmonic tension. Their ‘ah’ is a sound of listening and understanding, establishing the kind of supportive dialogue between the backing vocals and the lead singer that Warwick identifies as a hallmark of girl group music.\(^{19}\) The following line (‘But will you love me tomorrow?’) is sung by all four members, cementing the power and importance of the question. As in the Chiffons’ ‘Sweet Talkin’ Guy’, this vocal unity signifies that the accompanying voices share a common experience with the lead singer rather than merely sympathising with her story.

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\(^{16}\) All musical transcriptions in this thesis are by the author.

\(^{17}\) Interestingly, many remasters of the song rein in the string parts, making them blend into the sound of the other instruments.


\(^{19}\) Warwick, ix.
Immediately after the Shirelles sing the titular question at the end of Verse 1, we hear the violin for the first time. (The sound appears to be doubled; whether this is two violinists playing simultaneously or the same track layered on top of itself is unclear, but since there is always only one melodic line for the violin, I will once again refer to the violin as a singular part.) It plays a short motif that fills the gap between the lyrics of the first and second A sections, as shown in Figure 2:

![Figure 2: Violin transition in the Shirelles' recording of ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’.](image)

The violin communicates affection in its first three notes and excitement in the descending arpeggio that comes afterward. The rhythm and smooth articulation of the first part echoes the ‘tomorrow’ that the Shirelles have just sung, with the slight slide between the first two notes giving it a sighing feel. The second part leaps down quickly through a wider range of notes and a bouncier, shorter bow stroke is used, reviving the anticipation asserted by the solo cello ostinato.

Throughout Verse 2, the violin continues to act as a response to each phrase sung by the Shirelles. These ‘answer phrases’ are played with a full, rich vibrato, creating a sound that is reminiscent of a romantic film soundtrack. ‘Romantic’ is an interesting quality here; it suggests that the persona is considering that sex could be a positive experience, not just something scary, forbidden or completely unthinkable. This adds sweetness to the sound as Owens asks, ‘Is this a lasting treasure / Or just a moment’s pleasure?’ All the while, the strings flow underneath these vocal lines without overpowering them, adding to the non-verbal support provided by the backing singers.
The instrumentation of the bridge continues to develop the song’s juxtaposition of eagerness and doubt. The violin flits up into the higher parts of its range for a descending motif, shown in part in Figure 3:

![Figure 3: Violin part in the B section of the Shirelles’ recording.](image)

Here, several techniques are combined to convey nervous excitement. Trills are indicated by the tr above each note; a trill’s rapid alternation between two adjacent notes is achieved by a violinist quickly tapping a finger against the string, creating a trembling sound. The bow strokes used for these trills are fast and accented, and the first three notes are shortened by rests. The resulting sound is like a series of little musical shivers, which contributes to the mood established by the cello ostinato.

When we reach the instrumental break, the mood significantly changes. The violin has become the most prominent voice in the arrangement, playing a solo melodic line that I have transcribed below:

![Figure 4: Violin part in the instrumental break of the Shirelles’ recording.](image)
The upwards motion through a combination of scales, arpeggios and long high notes creates a feeling of rising excitement, but the most striking detail is the articulation. The notes are loud and accented, played with a heavy hand and a fast bow, and performed close to the recording studio microphone. This creates a bold, decisive sound that contrasts distinctly with the uncertainty in the lyrics. Warwick argues:

[Without the violin part,] the listener would not doubt that the subject/singer would end by spurning her lover’s advances. But the violin line’s dramatic range, soaring legato phrases, and erratic fluttering figures—especially during the instrumental break—counter this line of thinking and overwhelm it, if only by virtue of the violin’s comparative loudness and closeness to the microphone and, by implication, the listener.20

This effect is even clearer when we consider the disparity between this and the previous sections: had the violin part in this section been performed in the same legato style as the earlier accompanying material, the effect would be muted. Instead, the vigorous bow technique belies the shyness and doubt expressed in the lyrics, suggesting that the narrator shares some of her partner’s enthusiasm—even if she feels forbidden to say it out loud.

Several things about ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ were bold by 1960s moral standards: the idea of a teenage girl being excited to have sex with her boyfriend, even if that excitement was matched by anxiety; the girl being the one to decide whether they’d go ahead with it; and the song leaving her decision up for interpretation rather than taking the opportunity to encourage chastity. Depicting teenage female sexuality like this was outrageous, but it was also realistic. The arrangement reflects the complicated feelings that the narrator conveys through Goffin’s lyrics and Owens’ lead vocals. The backing singers empathise with her doubts; the rattling cello motif echoes the butterflies in her stomach; the violin solo tells us she’s more eager than she lets on. Warwick summarises the song’s feminist power in the lives of its listeners: ‘Taken as a whole, the song creates a sense of an ordinary girl, heart pounding, who uses stock musical language to rehearse the questions she knows she ought to ask of her lover even as she is swept up by desires and feelings she does not yet have the words to articulate.’21

20 Warwick, Girl Groups, Girl Culture, 116.
21 Warwick, 116.
‘So tell me now, and I won’t ask again…’

In keeping with the financially opportunistic aspect of cover versions that Will Leonard identified for the *Chicago Daily Tribune* in 1952, the wild popularity of the Shirelles’ record inspired other record labels to release a swarm of cover versions in a relatively short amount of time. Of the nine covers released between 1960 and 1965, four can be classified as girl group music: those recorded by Helen Shapiro and Little Eva (both 1962), the Chiffons (1963), and Lesley Gore (1965).\(^{22}\) None of these was released as a single, instead appearing in various positions on album tracklists.

One could wonder why these covers are worth exploring if none of them came close to the level of popularity achieved by the Shirelles’ recording. The answer lies in the differences. Recalling Douglas’ point that girl group music provided solace to teenage girls by giving voice to their complex thoughts, feelings and identities, it becomes clearer how variations on the original recording’s persona and narrative tone allowed ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ to resonate with a wider range of young female listeners. Whether through lead singers’ innately different vocal styles or deliberate instrumentation and production choices, each of these versions expresses a unique adaptation of the story of a girl on the precipice of consummating her relationship.

**Helen Shapiro: taking things lightly**

Sixteen-year-old Helen Shapiro’s recording can be found on her 1962 album ‘*Tops With Me*’, a collection of cover versions of recent hits.\(^{23}\) Compared to the struggle between nervousness and enthusiasm in the instrumentation of the Shirelles’ recording, Shapiro’s conveys more girlish excitement right from the start. The introduction features a

\(^{22}\) Two of the other versions in this time period were released by young women, but for each there is an argument not to include them in the girl group music umbrella. Brenda Lee recorded a cover when she was sixteen years old, but the adult male voices in her backing vocals and the ‘grown-up’ image her record label had cultivated for her since her preteen years rule her out; Dusty Springfield’s cover has a more pop-oriented sound, but at the age of twenty-five she was no longer an adolescent singing to adolescents.

‘heartbeat’ rhythm similar to the original version’s cello ostinato, but voiced instead in the upper register of the violin as shown in Figure 5:

![Figure 5: Violin motif in the introduction of Helen Shapiro’s recording.](image)

The bow strokes are fast and short, and the ends of the slurs are cut off early as demonstrated by the staccato dots. In combination with the high pitch and the jaunty low brass underneath, the effect is light-hearted and carefree.

The instrumentation of the verses, peppered with staccato horns and accentuated by finger cymbals, sustains the buoyant mood. This gives the song an upbeat feel despite a barely quicker tempo than in the original version (approximately 137 beats per minute to the Shirelles’ 136). There is no instrumental break, but a duet between Shapiro and an electric guitar during the bridge creates a moment of contemplation. This is a particularly interesting choice, given girl group music’s convention of deliberately excluding guitar from romantic moments due to its hyper-masculinity. In a way, this aspect of the arrangement reinforces gender stereotypes; the thoughtful, laid-back material goes to an instrument that Warwick dubs ‘by this point in history the signifier sine qua non of masculinity’, while the jaunty, silly stuff is given to the femininely coded violins. Juxtaposed with the wandering countermelody given to the guitar, the nimble, chromatic violin motif that underlies the following and final verse sounds almost comical.

Overall, Shapiro’s interpretation of the song comes across as light-hearted and slightly removed from the moment the lyrics describe. The warmth of her smile is audible even as she weighs up hope and heartbreak; it’s as if she’s already thinking that whatever happens tonight will make a fun story to tell her friends later. Listening and singing along to this

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version allowed teenage girls to try on a more easygoing persona, one that didn’t perceive sex as such an emotionally charged, earth-shaking life event.

**Little Eva and the sax of seduction**

Little Eva (full name Eva Narcissus Boyd) released her recording of ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ when she was nineteen. It can be found at the very end of the B-side of her only studio album, *Lilloco-Motion*, amongst a collection of other cover versions and her hit novelty single ‘The Locomotion’. This placement is understandable considering the daring way Little Eva interpreted the song; if a clueless listener could hear the Shirelles’ version and assume the lyrics merely referred to a night of dancing or chaste embraces, one can imagine they wouldn’t make the same mistake listening to this one.

The most significant differences are apparent from the first bar. The time signature of the song is compound duple instead of the original simple quadruple, with each bar divided into a pair of triplets (played lightly on the piano) rather than four even beats. The tempo is a great deal slower, emphasised by a thumping drum beat that snaps onto the halfway point of each bar, and the sound of a saxophone slinks into the mix as shown in Figure 6:

![Figure 6: Saxophone part in the introduction of Little Eva’s recording.](image)

The light C-major chords on the piano highlight the chromaticism in the saxophone solo, indicated by the presence of accidentals in Figure 6, and further emphasised in long notes on the downbeats. Here, the arrangement borrows jazz conventions, creating an obvious sonic link to African American culture. In her discussion of girl group music, Douglas points out white American culture’s tendencies to stereotype black women as ‘more sexually active and responsive’ and their sexuality as ‘deeply threatening.’ In response to these stereotypes, record labels trained their young black girl groups to uphold an air of innocence and respectability. Douglas also argues that standard girl group arrangements

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“[mute] the sexual explicitness” of songs like ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ by foregrounding orchestral strings and eschewing saxophones. Little Eva’s version goes against both of these conventions, with its instrumentation oozing sexuality and experience; perhaps this is why it was never released as a single.

Little Eva performs the lyrics with heavy *rubato* and syncopation, altering the rhythm so the words slowly unroll over the accompaniment. The saxophone part provides bluesy responses to the vocals, luxuriating in the elongated wordless space at the end of each phrase. As the song progresses, backing vocals contribute unobtrusive high harmonies on ‘ooh’s and ‘ah’s, encouraging the narrator from a distance, before joining Little Eva on the lyrics for most of the bridge to challenge their beaus en masse: ‘Tonight with words unspoken / You say that I’m the only one.’ The mood of this recording is unmistakably sultry, creating a new role that even the shyest teenage girls could try out in private while singing along to records in their bedrooms. In Little Eva’s voice, they could imagine themselves as more confident, more sexually ready; someone who could demand commitment from their partner without breaking a nervous sweat.

**The Chiffons: goosebumps and ‘girl talk’**

Girl group The Chiffons recorded ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ in 1963 on their debut album *He’s So Fine.* The song begins with a flurry of *glissandi* played on a harp, alternating with a pounding, stuttering drumbeat matched by the bass guitar. This combination of high, flourishing harp and booming bass evokes feelings of excitement and joy. The arrangement is uncomplicated and sweet as it continues: rattling drums initially echo the Shirelles’ heartbeat ostinato, balanced by more rhythmically sparse bass. The backing singers are vocally supportive throughout the song, often echoing the end of the lead singer’s line as if to affirm her thoughts, as shown here in parentheses: ‘Tonight you’re mine completely (completely) / You give your love so sweetly (so sweetly)’, and ‘I’d like to know that your love (your love) / Is love I can be sure of (sure of)’. In the absence of an assertive countermelody like those in the versions mentioned earlier, delicate harp arpeggios weave through the verses like gossamer thread.

27 Douglas, 92.
The Chiffons’ version captures the undeniable thrill of first love by taking the physical manifestations of attraction and translating them into music, from the shivers down the spine in the harp to the thumping heartbeat in the drums. The backing singers lovingly surround their leader; as she continually swoons over the dreaminess of her beloved, they sonically prop her up to propel her towards the question she needs to ask him. The harp’s juxtaposition of wild glissandi and more restrained, measured arpeggios evokes an admirer’s struggle to balance getting caught up in emotion and playing it cool. Warwick posits that ‘listeners can turn to music to seek access to their inner selves and find new ways of experiencing emotion through rehearsing the passions of others’. With this recording as the soundtrack to their daydreams, more reserved teenage girls could allow themselves a brief moment to revel in the giddiness of their infatuation.29

Lesley Gore and emotional melodrama

And then there’s Lesley Gore’s version, from her 1965 album *Lesley Gore Sings All About Love*, in which the narrator surrenders completely to the tidal waves of emotion.30 The arrangement is ornate and extravagant; Gore sings sweetly amidst thundering timpani, cascading flute lines and incredibly dramatic strings. The violins sustain a legato bow stroke in the introduction that continues until nearly halfway into the first verse, the changes in pitch rendered seamless by the smooth bow changes and heavy application of reverb. As Gore reaches the end of the line ‘you give your love so sweetly’, the violins begin an upwards chromatic semiquaver run that climbs almost two-and-a-half octaves in only ten beats. The combined effect of the run, the reverb and the rich texture provided by the rest of the instrumentation is heady and passionate, much like the hyper-romantic string writing Dyer refers to in ‘In Defence of Disco’.31

In addition to the runs, which appear throughout the song in different directions and lengths, the two most dramatic aspects of the string technique are the use of glissando and vibrato. Quick slides extending over intervals of sixths and sevenths add a sense of drama

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between the vocal sections of the song and increase excitement, while heavy vibrato applied all through the song further enhances the schmaltz. The theatricality in the string writing and the performance style combines with other, similarly over-the-top parts of the arrangement to convey not only the gravity of the choice the narrator is facing, but also the thrill of it. The arrangement portrays the possibility of sexual experience as tremendous and exciting, transcending the ‘fleshly reality’ that Douglas describes in the Shirelles’ original. Teenage girls could rewrite their private contemplations as a passionate monologue with this version playing; by imagining themselves as Lesley Gore in her reverberant palace of glissandi, they could stand on the precipice of something far more momentous.

The differences between this and other recordings of ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ become more meaningful when the issue of race is considered. Douglas explains that stereotypes of black women as being ‘sexually active and responsive’ made it ‘more acceptable…that black girls, instead of white ones, be the first teens to give voice to girls’ changing attitudes towards sex’, but that the expression of sexuality itself had to be as respectable as possible for white audiences to accept it. Warwick argues that white girl groups such as the Shangri-Las had more freedom to present themselves as rebellious, as a result of their whiteness; consider the performative theatricality of the strings in Lesley Gore’s recording, compared to the more controlled string sound accompanying the Shirelles. Expressing sexual excitement was less of a risk for Gore, a white teenage girl, than it was for the Shirelles, a black girl group. With this in mind, Little Eva’s recording takes an even bigger risk; a black teenage girl singing about sex, backed by sexually charged rock ’n’ roll instrumentation, was a remarkable deviation from the standards of respectability and decorum that most girl group artists were trained to emulate.

**Changing conversations**

In the early 1960s, American society was beginning to question why dominant cultural forces deemed it unacceptable and shocking for a teenage girl in a relationship to make

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33 Douglas, 95.
34 Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture*, 190.
choices about whether to have sex. As a result, the release of a wildly popular song in which this perspective is expressed without being demonised was startling and culturally significant. While the song was at the height of its popularity in the early 1960s, the legal fight to increase the availability of birth control was beginning, increasing the likelihood that teenage girls of the time would have found the song meaningful and relevant to their lives. The song suggested that sex wasn’t something that only boys their age were permitted to like, or a big aggressive thing that good, respectable girls were supposed to fear. In its depiction of a teenage girl grappling with complex feelings, ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ expressed both realistic concern and realistic excitement about a serious choice. The instrumentation of each of the recordings played an important role in constructing this complexity, supplying the excitement as a counterpoint to the concern found in the lyrics.

Part of the enduring appeal of ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ is its universality. The song’s countless cover versions demonstrate that the issue of anxiety about the emotional consequences of sex is not unique to teenage girls from the early 1960s. Possibly the most famous recording of the song is by King herself on her critically acclaimed solo album *Tapestry* (1971), her adult voice accompanied by piano and guitar in a combination that conveys emotional maturity and worldly experience. The song is so versatile, and about such a personal issue, that an examination of any cover version is bound to start interesting conversations. From a cultural context standpoint, however, it is most significant in its early 1960s girl group incarnations. ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ gave teenage girls a voice and helped a new genre to emerge, imbued with the kind of wordless, sexually charged rebellion that went on to hold great importance throughout the decade. Five different interpretations of the song in one genre told teenage girls that it was okay to feel five different ways about it, and that if they were going through something like this, they weren’t alone. These girl group recordings and their evocative arrangements are central to the feminist power of ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’, contributing to its status as a significant voice for teenage girls at the time of its release and a lasting popular music icon.

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35 Warwick, 112.
Chapter 2: ‘You Don’t Own Me’

In this chapter, I examine a song’s legacy across a period of over fifty years. John Madara and David White’s ‘You Don’t Own Me’ was not as immediately widely covered as Goffin and King’s ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’; online cover version database SecondHandSongs lists only six covers in the first ten years after its release, compared to the fifty covers of ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ that were released in the same time frame.¹ Many of the song’s better known cover versions were released decades later, as its message of female empowerment allowed it to slowly establish its place as a feminist anthem. This chapter investigates Lesley Gore’s original (1963), some of the cover versions that make up its legacy, and a couple that present an alternative reading. I discuss two of the most popular interpretations—the version from The First Wives Club (1996) and Grace and G-Eazy’s recording (2015)—as well as two cases that reflect the song’s potential for inspiring activism, the “‘You Don’t Own Me’ PSA’ (2012) and the Resistance Revival Chorus’s rendition (2018).² Compared to Chapter 1 where I only discuss covers by girl groups, these covers belong to a variety of genres and thus their stylistic and contextual details are more markedly different from those of the original recording. Before turning my attention to the way each performance creates new meaning in the song, I wish to highlight the melodic, rhythmic, harmonic and textual elements that make ‘You Don’t Own Me’ both a memorable pop song and an effectively communicated message of independence and female empowerment.

Lyrical devices

To aid the discussion and analysis of ‘You Don’t Own Me’, I have presented the song’s lyrics, structure and tonal centres in Table 2.³

¹ ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’, SecondHandSongs; ‘You Don’t Own Me,’ SecondHandSongs.
³ The tonal centres referenced here refer to those in the Lesley Gore recording. The specific keys have no significance in my analysis; I only use them to simplify my discussions of the song’s key relationships and chord progressions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Key</th>
<th>Lyrics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intro</td>
<td>G minor</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Verse 1 | G minor| You don’t own me
I’m not just one of your many toys
You don’t own me
Don’t say I can’t go with other boys |
| Chorus 1| G major| And don’t tell me what to do
Don’t tell me what to say
And please, when I go out with you
Don’t put me on display ’cause |
| Verse 2 | G minor| You don’t own me
Don’t try to change me in any way
You don’t own me
Don’t tie me down ’cause I’d never stay |
| Chorus 2| G major| I don’t tell you what to say
I don’t tell you what to do
So just let me be myself
That’s all I ask of you |
| Chorus 3| A-flat major| I’m young and I love to be young
I’m free and I love to be free
To live my life the way I want
To say and do whatever I please |
| Break   | A-flat major| N/A                                                                                                                                   |
| Chorus 4| A-flat major| And don’t tell me what to do
Oh, don’t tell me what to say
And please, when I go out with you
Don’t put me on display |
| Chorus 5| A major| I don’t tell you what to say
Oh, don’t tell you what to do
So just let me be myself
That’s all I ask of you |
| Outro   | B-flat major| I’m young and I love to be young
I’m free and I love to be free |

Table 2: ‘You Don’t Own Me’ lyrics and structure, transcribed by the author.4

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4 Lesley Gore, ‘You Don’t Own Me.’ All musical and lyrical analysis of Lesley Gore’s 1963 interpretation of this song refers to this recording.
These lyrics were intended to be sung by a teenage girl, even if it wasn’t necessarily going to be Lesley Gore; in an interview with music historian Kent Kotal for pop music newsletter *Forgotten Hits*, John Madara mentioned that he and co-writer David White had originally intended the song to be recorded by fifteen-year-old singer/songwriter Maureen Gray. While Gore’s voice, image and musical style became a factor later, Madara made it clear that the gender of the narrator was never in question:

> Our original intent was to write a song with a woman telling a man off ... Though we didn’t realize it at the time that it would become a woman’s anthem, it definitely was our intention to have a woman make a statement.⁵

As the narrator speaks directly to the ‘you’ of the song—presumably a boyfriend—through the lyrics, three main themes emerge: the objectionable way he treats her, the dynamic she desires in her relationship, and the value and vibrancy of her life as an individual. The first theme is most evident in Verse 1, Chorus 1, and Verse 2, through lyrics that condemn his tendency to behave in a controlling, possessive, and objectifying way. This condemnation is encapsulated by each occurrence of the song’s short, punchy refrain—‘you don’t own me.’ References to more specific domineering behaviours throughout the sections reinforce the argument. She indignantly points out that he tries to control her self-expression by telling her ‘what to do and what to say’ and trying to ‘change [her] in any way’. He also treats her in a proprietorial way by saying she ‘can’t go with other boys’ and trying to ‘tie [her] down’ in an unwanted committed relationship. Moreover, he not only objectifies her by ‘[putting her] on display’, but objectifies her peers by acting as if they are ‘[his] many toys’.⁶ While these lyrics can easily be interpreted as addressing a specific unpleasant boyfriend, they would also have resonated with many teenage girls’ experiences of sexism in romantic relationships. Where popular songs of the time like The Crystals’ ‘He Hit Me (And It Felt Like a Kiss)’ (1962) and Skeeter Davis’ ‘I Can’t Stay Mad at You’ (1963) portray physically or emotionally abusive relationships that leave their female narrators

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⁶ A valid alternative reading of these lyrics is that the object hasn’t demonstrated any of these controlling behaviours and the narrator is simply warning them not to. However, the idea of fighting back against current possessiveness is supported through various musical elements explored later in this thesis.
feeling helpless, Madara and White equip the narrator of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ with a list of offences to bolster her demand for emancipation.

In Chorus 2, the narrator builds on the critique of 1960s relationship norms by arguing for a fairer dynamic between her and her boyfriend. She points out that she doesn’t attempt to exert control over what he says and does (‘I don’t tell you what to say / I don’t tell you what to do’) and clarifies that she’s not interested in being given that kind of power (‘So just let me be myself / That’s all I ask of you’). This theme is foregrounded in Chorus 1 when the narrator asks her boyfriend not to treat her as a trophy (‘when I go out with you / Don’t put me on display’), implying that the relationship is salvageable if he works on his behaviour. Asserting an ideal outcome of a more equal dynamic, rather than one in which roles are wholly reversed, made the narrator’s demands more feasible for teenage girls looking for guidance on how to stand up to controlling figures in their own lives. It also made the song more palatable to a wider range of listeners overall; perhaps this potential for broad appeal helped it reach number two on the Billboard Hot 100.7

Chorus 3 homes in on the last of the themes I mentioned above: the narrator’s personhood. Earlier in the song, the singer has asserted her control over her own romantic relationships by demanding not to be told that she ‘can’t go with other boys’. She has insisted on her strong sense of selfhood further by declaring that she wants her boyfriend to ‘let me be myself’. This culminates in the third chorus, where the narrator sets aside her list of demands and simply relishes the joy of being young. As she sings about her youth and freedom empowering her to ‘live my life the way I want’, it’s not about the boyfriend anymore. The use of ‘I love to be free’ instead of ‘I want’ or ‘I’d love’ in this chorus is particularly telling, with the narrator pointing out that her freedom to speak and act without restraint and live life on her own terms is intact even as he attempts to control her. In the scheme of things, he truly doesn’t own her at all.

Part of the power of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ is the way in which its message is communicated: forcefully and without apology. Musicologist Shana Redmond commented on this on an

episode of NPR’s *American Anthem* series dedicated to the song: ‘There are no ellipses, no question marks whatsoever. She is not mixing messages. You understand what she is saying from line one.’8 Simple, assertive language is used throughout the lyrics, and the narrator’s demands are all phrased as declarations rather than questions or suggestions, e.g. ‘Don’t say I can’t go with other boys’ and ‘So just let me be myself / That’s all I ask of you’ instead of something like ‘Can’t I go with other boys?’ or ‘Maybe one day you could understand and let me be myself.’ In this way, the clarity and directness of the wording are fundamental to the effective communication of the song’s message.

Another important feature of the lyrics is their relative lack of specificity. Allan Moore, in his 2002 article ‘Authenticity as Authentication’, identifies a concept of ‘second-person authenticity, or authenticity of experience, which occurs when a performance succeeds in conveying the impression to a listener that that listener’s experience of life is being validated, that the music is “telling it like it is” for them.’9 The narrator of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ describes the reprehensible behaviour of her boyfriend, but not any particular incidents of that behaviour. There are no named characters or established locations. This more general language allows the lyrics to tell a story that is adaptable to a more diverse range of individual listeners’ experiences. Assessing the lyrics to ‘You Don’t Own Me’ through this lens illuminates how this song could be powerful to so many people in so many different contexts.

**Musical devices**

Simple yet striking musical elements reinforce the meaning in the lyrics, deliver their message of empowerment with minimal distraction, and help create a catchy pop song. The melody of the verse starts with a close pair of thirds (‘you don’t’ and ‘own me’) followed by mostly stepwise movement, illustrated in Figure 7.10

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10 As the melodies and chord progressions of the verses and choruses are largely identical, I’ll refer to these sections in the singular, as the verse and the chorus.
Altogether, the range of notes in the verse is limited to a minor 7th, and the melody eschews dramatic leaps; the biggest interval between two notes in a single phrase is a major 3rd. This allows for a more natural vocal delivery that can more convincingly express the indignation in the lyrics. Additionally, the first word of each line (‘you don’t own me’, ‘I’m not just one of your many toys’, etc.) is sung on the dominant, creating tension that is resolved when the melody falls to the tonic at the end of lines two and four. The verse also creates a feeling of foreboding through its use of the harmonic-minor scale. As labelled in Figure 7, the C-minor chord that accompanies ‘own me’ is immediately followed by a D-major chord with an added 7th. It’s the same IV–V chord progression that’s used in the chorus, and in many harmonically simple pop songs, but it features an interesting interval when used in a minor key. Juxtaposing the E-flat in the C-minor chord and the F-sharp in the D-major 7th chord showcases the augmented 2nd between them. This bolsters the condemnation expressed through lines like ‘I’m not just one of your many toys’ by lending the verse greater complexity and moodiness.

The move from the verse to the chorus happens quickly and simply, but it plays an important role in signalling the change of mood. The combination of a perfect 5th and perfect 4th through the lyrics ‘boys / And don’t’ creates a striking transition between sections. This shift (shown in Figure 8) uses the dominant much like the verse’s melody did, but here this note serves as a foothold, allowing the melody to continue upwards into the next octave.
Progressing up into this higher tessitura allows for a more resonant and declamatory vocal quality in the chorus, which is the most anthemic part of the song. Its animated, purposeful feel is achieved through a deft combination of melodic and harmonic straightforwardness. The song moves from G minor to its parallel major and employs one of the most common progressions in popular music (I–vi–IV–V), creating a more uplifting foundation. The phrases are short and rhythmically repetitive, and the melody is even more effortless than that of the verse: its movement is fully stepwise, and it has a range of only a perfect 4th. It’s now anchored to the tonic instead of the dominant, creating a less tense sound and a more obvious tonal centre. All these elements make the chorus remarkably easy to sing, a quality apparent in memorable pop songs and powerful protest songs alike. In this way, Madara and White make simplicity a distinguishing characteristic of not only the lyrics, but also the music.

As the song progresses towards the joy and zeal of Chorus 3, Madara and White pull one last device out of their musical toolbox. The tonality of the song has already changed a few times, switching seamlessly between G minor and G major to shift between different moods, but it modulates up a semitone to A-flat major at ‘I’m young and I love to be young / I’m free and I love to be free’. This takes the emotionally uplifting effect created by moving from a minor key to a major key and amplifies it. The melody and lyrics now seem even more passionate—think of someone raising their voice to a shout, the pitch naturally increasing along with the volume—and Madara and White don’t just use this upwards modulation once. They take it up another notch in Chorus 5 to land in A major, and the outro climbs a semitone higher still. The song ends in B-flat major after three modulations, lifting the singer’s voice all the way from a dark murmur at the start to a passionate cry at the end. Setting this final stanza of lyrics to such an ecstatic, victorious musical conclusion
amplifies its celebration of youth and liberation and drives home the overall message of empowerment.

Lesley Gore

The fact that Lesley Gore was the first musician to record ‘You Don’t Own Me’ is especially significant in the context of her existing discography, because many of her most popular songs were tonally and thematically consistent with prevailing girl group music narratives. Before ‘You Don’t Own Me’ came out, she had released three singles in 1963 that charted in the top ten of the Billboard 100. A key distinction between these songs and ‘You Don’t Own Me’ becomes clear if we look at their lyrics, illustrated in Figure 9:

‘It’s My Party’: Nobody knows where my Johnny has gone
But Judy left the same time
Why was he holding her hand
When he’s supposed to be mine?
It’s my party, and I’ll cry if I want to
Cry if I want to, cry if I want to
You would cry too if it happened to you

‘Judy’s Turn to Cry’: Well it hurt me so to see them dance together
I felt like making a scene
Then my tears just fell like rain drops
’Cause Judy’s smile was so mean
But now it’s Judy’s turn to cry
Judy’s turn to cry, Judy’s turn to cry
’Cause Johnny’s come back to me

‘She’s A Fool’: He don’t know it, but she cheats on him
With a boy like that it’s such a sin
I would never be untrue
I would never make him blue
But, she’s a fool, she’s a fool
She has his love but treats him cruel

Figure 9: Excerpts from the lyrics of ‘It’s My Party’, ‘Judy’s Turn to Cry’ and ‘She’s A Fool.’

11 Billboard, ‘Lesley Gore Chart History.’
The first two excerpts demonstrate a running theme of helplessness against boy-related emotional turmoil. In ‘It’s My Party’, the narrator is robbed of the chance to enjoy her own birthday party—‘it’s my party and I’ll cry if I want to’—when her boyfriend Johnny and a female guest named Judy hold hands, sneak away together, and exchange promise rings. The lyrics defend the narrator’s emotional outburst to the listener, insisting that ‘you would cry too if it happened to you’. This implies not only that romantic relationships should be a critical factor in teenage girls’ wellbeing, but that infidelity should cause them party-ruining levels of distress. ‘Judy’s Turn to Cry’ continues the story, with Johnny returning to date the narrator. The repetition of the title in the chorus highlights the narrator’s fixation on the transference of psychological pain to Judy. Tellingly, the lyrics make no mention of Johnny’s redeeming qualities and absolve him of responsibility for the narrator’s heartbreak, suggesting that the security of having a boyfriend is more desirable than the boy himself. These two songs are a product of the same cultural pressure, reflecting the all-consuming importance of finding a ‘good’ boyfriend that was ingrained in the average American teenage girl’s psyche.

While ‘She’s a Fool’ is less overtly about love-life-induced sadness, it still expresses strong feelings of romantic longing and passion. The narrator idolises the boy who’s dating the titular two-timing ‘fool’, calling him ‘the best thing in the whole wide world’ and equating the idea of cheating on him with a biblical act of evil. She promises that if given the chance to date the boy herself, she would be faithful and prioritise his happiness: ‘I would never be untrue / I would never make him blue’. Her wording here—‘would never’—highlights her devotion, and overall the lyrics convey how central this boy’s welfare is to her own. Like the two singles before it, ‘She’s a Fool’ emerges from and contributes to the pressure discussed above by conveying how highly a teenage girl is expected to prioritise the boys in her life.

Then came ‘You Don’t Own Me’. Lyrically and musically, it challenges the sexism of 1960s gender roles and the helpless, hysterical female archetype reflected in Gore’s previous singles. Gore’s vocal performance and the instrumental arrangement builds upon Madara and White’s rich compositional foundation and amplifies the powerful, direct message of the song. Madara claimed in his Forgotten Hits interview that while Klaus Ogerman created
the arrangement for all of Gore’s songs, producer Quincy Jones allowed the songwriters to make adjustments to this song’s instrumentation during the recording session after they heard it and found it lacking. These adjustments included the addition of ‘piano, strings, [and an] additional modulation in the ending’; according to Madara, the result was an arrangement that matched what the songwriters would have created if given the opportunity to produce it themselves. I suggest that this consistent execution of artistic intent significantly increases the arrangement’s capacity to serve the composition and allows the song’s message to be communicated more effectively.

The introduction (0:00–0:08) conjures up a dramatic mood that immediately distinguishes the song from the upbeat energy of Gore’s three aforementioned hits and suits the seriousness of the message soon to be communicated by the lyrics. The lead guitar part plays a major role in this; it begins with a quick anacrusis that signals a minor tonality, then travels downwards to the tonic, which is emphasised through repeated quavers. The thunderous, foreboding effect created by this low, insistent motif is aided by the piano, which duplicates the anacrusis in a lower octave with a more reverberant sound created by a studio effect. Against these rhythmically busy figures, the song’s slow tempo—roughly sixty-four beats per minute, in compound duple time—is accentuated by a high tonic note played on a xylophone in the middle of each bar. This striking percussive element evokes the sound of skeletons or clanking chains, suggesting a feeling of oppression. Like the reverb applied to the piano, the echo of the xylophone creates a sense of vastness. The momentous atmosphere grabs the listener’s attention, especially in the context of Gore’s existing discography, and signals to them that the song about to be sung is of great importance.

In Verse 1 (0:08–0:27), Gore’s voice continues the serious tone established in the introduction through simple yet effective vocal performance and studio production. The melody sits at the low end of her range, closer to the pitches at which she would naturally speak. This use of lower tessitura invites a more controlled, quietly focused vocal delivery, rebelling against the stereotype that a woman who expresses anger is shrill and hysterical.

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13 Madara, ‘John Madara’s Greatest Hits.’
She sings the words with minimal vocal embellishment, only adding a slight vibrato on the low, long notes at the end of each phrase: ‘You don’t own me / I’m not just one of your many toys.’ In conjunction with her restrained elocution, the spare use of ornamentation keeps the listener’s attention on the wording and signals a complete lack of frivolity. Her vocals are overdubbed, making her sound like a small choir of Lesley Gores singing in unison rather than a solitary singer. This sonic support of her vocal line signals that she’s not alone in her assertions of independence, functioning similarly to backing vocals in a girl group song. In the last word of the verse—‘boys’—she draws out the diphthong, widening the vowel slowly to match the swell of the arrangement as it advances towards the chorus.

As Chorus 1 begins (0:27), the jubilance of the melody and chord progression is enhanced by the introduction of a violin part. (As the violins are always monophonic in this arrangement, I will refer to them as a singular part as I did in Chapter 1.) The violin’s countermelody occupies the octave above the vocal melody, overlying the thumps of the drum part in the second half of every bar with stepwise quavers. See Figure 10:

![Figure 10: Violin countermelody in Chorus 1 of Lesley Gore’s recording.](image)

Elements of production and performance style contribute to the exhilarating effect: the bow strokes are swift, accented and light, and heavy reverb is applied to make the sound bloom. The reverb also helps the violin seem further away compared to clearer elements.
such as Gore’s voice and the drums, which seem like they were recorded closer to the studio microphone and thus feel more corporeal. A trio of backing singers softly sing triadic harmonies on ‘ooh’ vowels, echoing the high register of the violin and providing wordless support to Gore’s lyrics. Similarly, the violin complements and elevates the vocal melody, soaring ethereally above the other instruments. These techniques allow the arrangement to amplify the fearless, insistent lyrics of the first chorus, surrounding and uplifting Gore’s voice without overpowering it.

The violin countermelody continues into Verse 2 (0:41–1:01), accentuating the chromaticism of the harmonic scale as shown in Figure 11:

![Violin countermelody in Verse 2 of Lesley Gore’s recording.](image)

As the verse continues, the melody plunges into the next lowest octave to match the lower tessitura of the verse melody, which Gore performs with the same hushed confidence as in Verse 1. She adds a hint of a snarl to the ‘N’ of the word ‘never’ in the final line, emphasising it to convey her conviction. The gradually lowering pitch of the violin (shown in Figure 11 above) and its reverb-laden sound make it function somewhat like the voice of a backing singer, offering more humanised support to the feelings expressed through the lead vocals.
The orchestration and performance of Choruses 2 and 3 (1:01–1:32) are nearly identical to Chorus 1, allowing the new lyrics to take centre stage. This is arguably the most meaningful section of lyrics when taken in the context of Gore’s earlier hits. Compare Gore asserting her independence and her love of being ‘young’ and ‘free’ to the narratives of ‘It’s My Party’, ‘Judy’s Turn to Cry’ and ‘She’s a Fool’, which describe a teenage girl whose entire self-worth is wrapped up in her relationship with a boy. Here, she’s revelling in her life outside of her dating experiences. The backing singers return with harmonious ‘ooh’s, slightly louder than in the previous chorus. When the song modulates up a semitone in Chorus 3, their vowels are slightly more open—‘ah’, ‘aw’ and ‘oh’ rather than ‘ooh’—creating a more spacious sound. The instrumental break (1:32–1:50) has the violin leaving its role as a descant to take over the verse melody, echoing Gore’s youthful voice with a fuller, more dramatic timbre. This rich orchestral figure gives the narrator’s demands even more substance, conveying the idea that the importance and maturity of her message is beyond words.

In the final two choruses and outro (1:50 onwards), the combination of Gore’s vocal performance and the arrangement surrounding it takes the song’s passion to unprecedented heights. The violin shoots up into the stratosphere of its range, answering each line of the lyrics with arpeggios rather than stepwise movement. The backing singers contribute an angelic choir of the aforementioned opened vowels, heightening the joyousness of the sound as Gore’s voice cries out above the ensemble. The ornamentation she adds to the melody doesn’t sound as though it was shoehorned in for embellishment’s sake, but rather as a natural byproduct of the passion she feels. Musicologist Alexandra Apolloni identifies how ‘at the song’s climax—“I’m young, and I love to be young”—she almost speaks the words, spitting them out.’¹⁴ These elements work together to create a rapturous, triumphant end to the song; it’s as if the power that Gore kept close to her chest throughout the verses is now streaming out, unable to be contained any longer.

Girls—and women—on film

Apolloni notes that ‘Gore embodied white, middle-class respectability, even while a song like “You Don’t Own Me” expressed desire for a different kind of freedom. It was her appearance of respectability that let her sing such songs without fear of public reprisal.’\textsuperscript{15} This trustworthy ‘good girl’ image was reinforced through the aesthetics of Gore’s live performances. One of her most famous live performances of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ was in the televised concert film \textit{T.A.M.I. Show} (1964). The concert featured popular rock ’n’ roll and R&B musicians from England and the United States and was filmed in front of an audience of screaming teenage fans. (See Appendix 1 for the full line-up.) Gore’s two main appearances in the film—the second verse of the opening credits montage and her ten-minute set—demonstrate how her image made the song’s message more acceptable to a wider audience.

To counterbalance the manufactured setting of \textit{T.A.M.I. Show}’s concert stage, the film’s opening credits montage introduces the film’s stars more informally by showing their preparation for the concert. This montage immediately establishes the film’s tendency to depict male and female performers differently. The majority of the male musicians are filmed hanging out and having fun together; Gerry and the Pacemakers play card games on the concert’s charter bus, Jan & Dean drive go-karts and attempt skateboard tricks, and the Barbarians have a makeshift jam session in the open boot of a moving car. In contrast, the members of the concert’s only other female act—The Supremes—are depicted applying heavy makeup and styling their hair in a dressing room (see Figure 12a). Similarly, Gore’s segment shows her singing gracefully while reading sheet music in the back of a convertible. A cut to a close-up shot features her stylish blouse, winged eyeliner and neat flip hairstyle (see Figure 12b) as hosts Jan & Dean sing ‘Lesley Gore, now she sure looks pretty!’\textsuperscript{16} The juxtaposition with the male performers’ activities illustrates how gender roles affected all areas of life. Young men were encouraged to have fun and be athletic in their free time, while young women were required to spend that time sitting still, acting ladylike and becoming glamorous.

\textsuperscript{15} Apolloni, ‘Rebel Girl.’
\textsuperscript{16} Steve Binder, director, \textit{T.A.M.I. Show} (1964; Los Angeles: Dick Clark Productions, 2009), Blu-Ray Disc, 1080p HD.
After the introduction, Gore is not seen on screen again until her concert set. Approximately thirty-six minutes into the film, she comes onstage and performs six songs: ‘Maybe I Know’, ‘You Don’t Own Me’, ‘You Didn’t Look Around’, ‘Hey Now’, ‘It’s My Party’, and ‘Judy’s Turn to Cry’. ‘You Don’t Own Me’ is the only ballad of her set and one of only three ballads performed in *T.A.M.I. Show*, perhaps to maintain high levels of energy in the audience. These slower songs are all filmed with a smudged effect on the lens, as shown during ‘You Don’t Own Me’ in Figure 13.

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17 Binder, *T.A.M.I. Show*.
18 Binder, *T.A.M.I. Show*. 
This haziness around the edges of the frame during ‘You Don’t Own Me’ adds a soft, romantic look that enhances the way Gore is filmed. For most of the song, the camera is zoomed in so that her head and shoulders fill the frame, drawing attention to her simple, glamorous makeup. The close shot also emphasises that her facial expressions are never truly angry or confrontational, only serious or joyous. In combination with the misty-eyed ‘ballad cam’, this makes the declamatory, rebellious lyrics seem more like a heartfelt personal appeal than a threat to the status quo.

Clothing, hair and makeup were key elements in presenting Gore as a mature, respectable role model for teenage girls. This is particularly evident in the context of the film’s other performances, and especially the ones led by male musicians. Gore is preceded onstage by soul singer Marvin Gaye, who is accompanied by a trio of backup singers. T.A.M.I. Show’s crowd of go-go dancers surrounds Gaye as he concludes his set with the upbeat ‘Hitch Hike’. Their energetic choreography serves to portray them as enthusiastic fans, much like the screaming teenagers in the audience that the camera often cuts to amongst shots of the performers; it also bolsters Gaye’s image as a sex symbol, as it is his musical performance and his physical presence that appears to drive these dancers into a frenzy. The dancers’ costumes are very casual, with many female dancers sporting t-shirts or bikinis, and there’s no common silhouette or pattern to be seen. In comparison, the T.A.M.I. Show musicians are dressed in a more uniform and often far more formal way, conveying their role as talented professional entertainers.

As in the introduction, the show’s female stars are depicted with a particular emphasis on beauty and grace. Lesley Gore, the Supremes, and Marvin Gaye’s trio of backing singers perform in more modest outfits made from stiffer fabrics, sport more tightly coiffed hairstyles, and dance in a more controlled manner. Gore is dressed in a high-necked blouse and a straight skirt hemmed just below her knees, complete with a buttoned suit jacket, high-heeled shoes and a brooch near her neckline. Her hair is in the same well-groomed, hyper-feminine style as seen in the introduction, its neatness carrying connotations of high class. The overall style is befitting of an older, more conservative woman, similar to the outfits worn by Marvin Gaye’s backup singers. Later in the film, the Supremes perform in matching long full-sleeved gowns. While the flowy fabric and large bow detail add a more
glamorous touch, their costumes have the same modest silhouette as those seen earlier; Warwick notes that the ‘stiff elegance’ of their trademark coordinated dresses ‘marked the trio as refined and adult’.¹⁹ This costuming presents the female singers of T.A.M.I. Show as older and more professional, and in the case of ‘You Don’t Own Me’, helps convey the maturity in Gore’s delivery of the lyrical ultimatums and demands.

Altogether, these visual elements in the T.A.M.I. Show performance of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ reinforce Gore’s ‘role model’ image to make the song’s message easier to swallow. Her gracious onstage demeanour and conservative, ladylike style garner viewers’ respect while reassuring them that she’s not insolent, immature, or intent on abolishing femininity. As she declares in the song, all she asks is that she’s allowed to be herself—and if being herself means being such a well-behaved young lady, then who are they to deny her?

**Inheriting a legacy**

On 16 February 2015, after an illustrious career in music, film and television, Lesley Gore passed away aged sixty-eight. Quincy Jones, the producer of her original recording of ‘You Don’t Own Me’, met seventeen-year-old singer Grace Sewell—stage name Grace—at a charity banquet a year before Gore’s death.²⁰ Billboard journalist Megan Buerger describes the encounter in an interview with Grace: ‘[Jones had] heard some of her music thanks to an existing relationship with her managers and suggested the two hit the studio to remake one of his classics. He chose the 1963 hit “You Don’t Own Me” because Gore was exactly Grace’s age when she and Jones recorded it.’²¹

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²⁰ Sewell has since rebranded as SAYGRACE as of October 2019, and streaming services now list her recording of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ under this name. However, she went by Grace at the time the song was released, and I will refer to her as such to avoid confusion.

This auspicious meeting led to the two collaborating on a cover version, but it wasn’t until after Gore’s death that Jones decided to release the song as a tribute to her. Despite Grace’s relative anonymity at the time, there were already several elements that set this cover version up for potential success: the public was still mourning the loss of a 1960s pop legend, a renowned producer was returning to a treasured early work, and ‘girl power’-style feminism had achieved an ever-developing mainstream presence in popular culture. Still, there was an additional factor at play that could introduce the song to an even wider audience. Gerald Earl Gillum, better known by his rap moniker G-Eazy, had recently achieved a number three on the Billboard 200 with his sophomore album These Things Happen. He came on board to record a rap verse, ostensibly to help modernise the song for a larger market, and hip-hop producer Parker Ighile co-produced the track. The cover version was released on 17 March 2015, one month after Lesley Gore’s death.

I want to investigate this recording not only because of these significant links to the original recording alone, but because of the popularity it achieved. It’s currently one of the most well-known cover versions in the song’s history, partly as a result of copious advertising synchronisation: it has appeared in a commercial for the Australian TV show Love Child, a Christmas commercial for UK department store House of Fraser, a Ford commercial, a Toyota commercial, and a trailer for the 2016 movie Suicide Squad. Additionally, it has been advertised as a feminist anthem in its own right, with Grace explaining to online music magazine Idolator that the song’s theme of emancipation and equality ‘was a message that [she] felt strongly about and it’s empowering for women to hear those words.’ Theoretically, these factors should make Grace and G-Eazy’s recording of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ as liberating to the young women of 2015 as Lesley Gore’s was to the young women of 1964 and the decades that followed. Instead, despite its auspicious context and feminist intentions, it is a woeful miscarriage of the song’s empowering message.

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24 Grace featuring G-Eazy, ‘You Don’t Own Me.’
25 Sewell, ‘Grace Talks Hit Single “You Don’t Own Me.”’
Broke hoes and basic bitches

Many of the changes made in Grace and G-Eazy’s recording detract from the power of Madara and White’s music and lyrics. The instrumental arrangement smothers the composition’s powerful simplicity and Grace’s vocal performance underplays the lyrics’ boldness. Worst of all is the entitlement and misogyny, both implicit and explicit, that permeates G-Eazy’s verse and poisons the song’s intended message of female independence.

As discussed earlier, the powerful, straightforward music and lyrics of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ are a key part of what makes it such a great song; here, however, the heavy-handed instrumental arrangement submerges them in sonic clutter. Music critic Ben Westhoff identifies some of the trends that helped songs to achieve chart success in 2015 in his analysis of David Guetta/Nicki Minaj/Bebe Rexha/Afrojack collaboration ‘Hey Mama’: ‘Having cracked Billboard’s top 10, it’s the perfect representation of what a rap/dance combo sounds like in 2015. A quick-building pop trance track with electronic trumpets, an ecstatic, soaring sung chorus, and a bit of rapping.’

Though ‘You Don’t Own Me’ is more soul/R&B than rap/dance, these typical musical devices are still present. My problem with this version’s instrumentation is not that it updates the song for a 2015 audience, but that the randomness and brashness in this particular attempt at modernisation hinders the song right from the start. For example, the second phrase of the introduction is interrupted by a choppy, stuttering effect, and a choir appears just afterwards to loudly sing ‘hah, hah, hmm, hmm’ twice and then never return again. In comparison to the ‘oh’s and ‘ah’s of the backing singers in Gore’s version that serve a rhetorical purpose and support the lead vocals, these stabs of choral sound contribute nothing clear or meaningful to the arrangement and stifle Grace’s voice as she sings the title of the song. Likewise, the wobbling synth bassline that accompanies Grace in Verse 1 is mixed so prominently that it almost eclipses the sound of her voice, essentially denying her the opportunity to speak her mind. This is exacerbated by her vocal performance, transcribed in Figure 14:

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Figure 14: Rhythmic comparison of the first lyric as performed by Lesley Gore and Grace.

Grace’s voice also has more of a drawl to it that pulls at some of the vowels: ‘I’m not just one of yaw many toys’, ‘Don’t tie me down ’cause I’d ne-vuh stay’. The way she stretches the rhythm around is enough of a modification to muddle the word sounds themselves, robbing the song of the powerful directness that helped give it its iconic status in the first place. Arguably, what she’s doing here is also an example of an objectionable trend in contemporary pop music: a non-black singer putting on a ‘blaccent’, that is, imitating the pronunciation and vernacular of black musicians. This affectation is ubiquitous, as noted by Carvell Wallace for MTV: ‘The practice has roots so deeply woven into rock history that we usually don’t notice it. Mick Jagger, Elvis Presley, Joe Cocker, Roger Daltrey, Sting, and countless others have all been doing black imitation voices so long that in the collective imagination those sounds belong to them rather than to the blues, R&B, and reggae musicians they took them from.’ Similar to the discrepancy that Wallace observes in singer Meghan Trainor’s accent between her interviews and her songs, Grace’s accent in interviews is glaringly Australian.27 The combination of vocal disingenuousness and exaggeratedly altered rhythms leaves her sounding overly mannered and insincere. This is compounded by the sultry, petulant mood she applies to the thoughts and feelings in the text. Her vocal delivery is sassy and almost pouty, but bereft of passion; music journalist Tim Byron points out that she sounds somewhat anonymous, ‘substituting sounding somewhere in between Adele and Amy Winehouse for emoting.’28 Emotional investment—or at least a convincing performance of it—is key to an effective delivery of

what should be a heartfelt narrative, and replacing that investment with contrived pronunciation and a sulky attitude interferes with the lyrics’ integrity.

G-Eazy’s rapping is by far the greatest deviation from the spirit of the original song. There’s nothing inherently bad about interpreting the existing lyrics as a conversation or adding rap verses; there are other cover versions that do those things, such as those by Minus-One featuring Semeli and Maxine Linehan featuring Phlaymz, respectively. However, I argue that this one specifies in a misogynistic way that detracts from the song’s core message of female empowerment.29 G-Eazy not only dominates the narrative with his two verbose verses, but his additions sideline and objectify the narrator while vilifying other women. In this version, the overall narrative is now about the dynamic between the guy who’s used to seeing women as replaceable and boring, and the only girl he’s ever met who’s assertive and financially independent enough to change that. Table 3 presents the full lyrics; the rap sections are labelled as Verses A and B to distinguish from the song’s original verses, and Grace’s lyrics are italicised to distinguish from G-Eazy’s.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Vocals</th>
<th>Lyrics</th>
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| Intro   | Grace  | You don’t own me  
You don’t own me |
| Verse A | G-Eazy | Well, let’s go, but I’m Gerald  
And I can always have just what I want  
She’s that baddest I would love to flaunt  
Take her shopping, you know, Yves Saint Laurent  
But nope, she ain’t with it though  
All because she got her own dough  
Boss bossed if you don’t know  
She could never ever be a broke ho |
| Verse B | G-Eazy | Really though, honestly, I get bored of basic [bitches]  
She’s the baddest, straight up vicious  
Texting her and asking her if she’s alone  
And send some [naked] pictures, she said no (what?)  
Well goddamn, she said, ‘Come over and see it for yourself’  
Never asking for your help  
Independent woman, she ain’t for the shelf  
No, she’s the one, smoke with her ‘till the [weed is gone]  
Stayin’ up until we see the sun  
Baddest ever, I swear she do it better than I’ve ever seen it done  
Never borrow, she ain’t ever loan  
That’s when she told me she ain’t never ever ever ever gonna be owned |
| Chorus 2 | Grace: | Huh, hey (you don’t own me) Oh, no  
G-Eazy: | Well, okay  
Grace: | Oh, no, no (you don’t own me) Oh no, no, no  
You don’t, you don’t, hey! (you don’t own me)  
G-Eazy: | But just know  
Grace: | Nab  
G-Eazy: | You never met somebody like me before, though  
Grace: | Nab nab nah nah, nab (you don’t own me), nah, nah  
G-Eazy: | Eazy  
Grace: | You don’t own me (own me, own me) |

Table 3: Lyrics and structure of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ by Grace and G-Eazy, transcribed by the author.\footnote{Grace featuring G-Eazy, ‘You Don’t Own Me.’ All musical analysis of this interpretation refers to this recording. The bracketed lyrics are censored in this recording and were taken from a live performance. Grace and G-Eazy, performers, ‘Grace - You Don’t Own Me Ft. G-Eazy (Tradução),’ uploaded by Br Legendas on 18 June 2016, YouTube video, 3:19, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qF5ASTvFesE.}
The first transgression is that G-Eazy’s verse demonstrates a lack of respect for any woman that fails to meet his personal standards. Even the soundbites edited into his rap for the radio-friendly version have an uncomfortably exploitative feel: ‘bitches’ is censored by a soundbite of a woman’s distressed voice pleading ‘no!’, and ‘weed is gone’ is replaced by a woman gasping with pleasure. He expresses disdain towards ‘basic bitches’ with mainstream interests and ‘broke hoes’ without financial security; even the compliment ‘she ain’t for the shelf’ implies that there are women who are. This practice of insulting other women to compliment one specific woman is at odds with the song’s origin in a genre that valued sisterhood so highly. While it was permissible in girl group music for one girl to mock another as the result of an emotionally charged dispute, as in ‘Judy’s Turn to Cry’, the exclusively female narrators of girl group songs provided a sanctuary from male judgment.

Robbing the narrator of sisterhood is one thing, but to make things worse, he also robs her of the opportunity to define herself. The great thing about the openness to interpretation of Madara and White’s text is that whoever sings it gets to cast themself as the narrator through their own performance choices. However, Grace’s attempt to do this is eclipsed by the sheer volume of detail that G-Eazy supplies about this ‘straight up vicious’ woman. ‘Never borrow, she ain’t ever loan’ portrays her as financially self-sufficient, and her refusal to text him explicit photos indicates an air of flirty assertiveness (or at least an understandable concern for her online safety). He tells us she exudes confident sexuality—‘she’s the baddest’, ‘she said, “Come over and see it for yourself”’—and admires her stamina in smoking ‘till the weed is gone’. G-Eazy may consider these compliments, but the problem is that the narrator’s identity becomes more clearly defined through the perspective of a man than in her own words. The lack of detail in the original lyrics is what makes the narrative so adaptable, but it gets hopelessly overshadowed in a cover where the additional male character is the only one who gets to have a name. G-Eazy adds a considerable amount of new material, while Grace’s additions are shorter and predominantly in response to his. This imbalance is exacerbated by the aforementioned anonymity of Grace’s vocal performance. Describing the narrator as anonymous may seem to contradict the level of detail that the listener is given about her character, but upon
closer inspection, it’s all from him; for all that G-Eazy tells us exactly who he thinks she is, she never gets a chance to tell us herself.

The most reprehensible part of G-Eazy’s rap is his attempts to take away the narrator’s agency to suit his own sense of entitlement. While lines like ‘I’m not just one of your many toys’ now function as a direct (but delayed) response to his boast that he ‘can always have just what he wants’, he still gets to explain her independence well before she does. It’s not because of the shallowness of the materialistic ways he expresses attraction that she’s resistant to them—it’s ‘all because she got her own dough’. Indeed, one of the most grating things about G-Eazy’s character is how little he seems to care for the narrator’s point of view, illustrated most clearly by the way he repeatedly interrupts her. She only gets to sing the title of the song a couple of times before he interjects with his first rap verse. For the most part, his lyrics don’t even directly address Grace’s; instead, he brags about her to a third party. When he does finally speak to her in the outro, it is less out of concern for her opinions or a desire for a proper conversation and more out of a desire to brag. His parting words endorse the damaging trope of ‘when a girl says no, she really means yes’: ‘But just know, you never met somebody like me before, though.’ The implication is that he would love for this dazzlingly untameable woman to be tamed, and that he believes himself to be the only one capable of doing so. Even though Grace immediately counters this (‘nah nah nah nah, nah, nah’) effectively denying him the last word, the fact that he gets to say it in the first place still supports his fantasy of subjugation. In these ways, G-Eazy’s rap does a great disservice to the ideas that the original song stood for.

Journalist and author Joan Vos McDonald takes an opposing view. She writes on her personal blog that her millennial daughter doesn’t understand why she finds the version to be a welcome feminist update. She makes note of how in the 1960s, a girl professing her love of independence was likely to get her shunned by the crowd of guys from which she should eventually find a husband. Now, Grace is singing those same lyrics, but there’s a built-in perspective of a male admirer in the form of G-Eazy rapping about how valid and attractive that independence is.31 From that viewpoint, it’s a welcome instruction to today’s

young men that they should respect—nay, desire—a woman who asserts her self-reliance like this. My question is: do they really need that instruction? In 2015? After third-wave feminism helped normalise the idea of a powerful woman making it on her own? In the midst of a generational shift away from socially enforced lifelong monogamy and towards a more casual, no-strings-attached hookup culture? The world truly didn’t need G-Eazy’s help in making independence cool and sexy again, and implying that the original lyrics are improved by male validation contradicts their core message of independence.

Grace and G-Eazy’s cover version may be the most well-known rendition of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ amongst younger generations at the time of writing this thesis, but in some significant ways, it stands as an outlier in the song’s legacy. Far more common are performances that build on the song’s feminist origins, such as its use in The First Wives Club (1996), the “You Don’t Own Me” PSA’ (2012), and the Resistance Revival Chorus’s version (2018). Each takes advantage of the original lyrics’ openness to interpretation; without significant changes to any of the words, the song’s tenet of self-ownership becomes focused on respective themes of female friendship, political rights, and resisting abuse. I explore the new meanings created in these covers before discussing them in contrast with Grace and G-Eazy’s version to ascertain why the latter version falls so short.

**The First Wives Club and narrative sisterhood**

In the 1996 film The First Wives Club, ‘You Don’t Own Me’ becomes a recurring motif that reinforces the values at the heart of the narrative. The film focuses on Cynthia (Stockard Channing), Elise (Goldie Hawn), Annie (Diane Keaton), and Brenda (Bette Midler), four middle-aged women who were best friends in college but lost contact after graduation. The impetus of the plot is Cynthia’s suicide after her husband leaves her for a younger woman. The remaining three friends reunite at her funeral, bond over the loss of their own husbands to similarly younger women, and decide to team up to wreak revenge on the men who hurt them. After an attempt to find one ex-husband’s financial records ends in the trio attempting a dangerous stunt, they return to the building they use as a clubhouse and reminisce fondly about their youth. Their dialogue reveals to the viewer that the women performed ‘You Don’t Own Me’ together as a surprise for Cynthia at her twenty-
first birthday party, ‘[singing] to her like a girl group’ despite Annie’s stage fright.\textsuperscript{32} This associates the song with not only bravery, but also the film’s overall theme of valuing female friendship.

Memorably, this association is intensified by a reprise of the song at the end of the film, by which time the three women of the titular First Wives Club are no longer defining themselves by the status of their relationship with men. Having decided to use the dirt they’ve gathered on their ex-husbands for social good, they blackmail the men into funding a crisis centre for abused women, which they name in Cynthia’s memory. The final scene of the film, set after the opening party of the crisis centre in its now-empty function room, finds the trio reflecting together on their experiences. Brenda and Elise begin to tease the perpetually meek Annie by singing the first verse of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ and attempting their old girl group-inspired choreography. Annie initially protests, but the support of her friends emboldens her; as she gathers the courage to sing, the sound of a violin section holding a suspenseful high-pitched \textit{tremolo} fades in. Her determined performance of the first chorus is accompanied by cheerful piano chords and exclamations of joy from her friends, and together the three women launch into an upbeat choreographed routine that concludes the film.

Their performance is not only a heart-warming tribute to their departed friend, but an excellent enhancement of the song’s uplifting message. Marc Shaiman’s arrangement makes for one of the most jubilant renditions of the song I have ever heard, combining girl group vocals with symphonic orchestral instrumentation. Warm, sonorous string sections recall the girl group sound, while stabs from the brass section add exuberance and fill out the arrangement. From Verse 2 onwards, a tinkling glockenspiel played lightly in a high register adds a fairytale feeling. The return to a minor key that occurs in the song’s instrumental break is omitted, allowing Shaiman to continue building the song’s buoyancy uninterrupted through major chords and upwards modulations. The characters’ three distinct voices singing the lyrics together conveys a sense of solidarity more explicitly than the vocal overdubbing in Gore’s original recording. When additional unseen female voices

\textsuperscript{32} Wilson, \textit{The First Wives Club}. 
join them later to sing effervescent backing harmonies, the resulting choral sound signifies that this unity is universal, including not only these three women but all women. This larger-than-life quality is supported by the use of non-diegetic instrumentation to accompany on-screen singing, borrowing the conventions of movie musicals and evoking their themes of finding beauty and magic in everyday human life.

The most significant addition Shaiman makes to the song is an extended coda section that accounts for approximately half of the cover’s duration. Over the chord progression of the chorus, the characters sing new melodies transcribed in Figure 15:
The space between each ‘you don’t own me’ highlights the backing singers’ girl group-style vocables (‘whoa-oh-oh, oh no’) and the violins’ soaring countermelody. The high tessitura of the vocal lines captures the same feeling of shouting for joy that Madara and White originally achieved in the song’s later choruses, and diegetic laughter and squeals of delight from the main characters heighten the feeling of fun. Altogether, it concludes the song.

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33 Wilson, *The First Wives Club*. 
with a bombardment of the best kind; here and throughout the arrangement, every element is magnified and coordinated to exude pure happiness.

The triumphant mood of this cover echoes the personal growth and philanthropic acts these characters have achieved, and the women supporting each other on backing vocals highlights the importance of their friendship. The absence of the ex-husbands is especially notable here; unlike in the Grace and G-Eazy version and its mansplaining rap verses, these characters don’t need men around to validate their strength and independence. The film’s use of the song awards it new meaning, evoking themes of sisterhood, being brave together, and turning grief into a force for good. The women of the First Wives Club aren’t just singing about repelling the controlling forces in their own lives: they’re singing about working towards a world in which no woman has to endure abuse ever again. In this way, the song’s non-specific message is made specific through a narrative context rather than through copious additional lyrics, meaning that the cover’s inspiring spirit is still widely adaptable to match listeners’ own experiences.

“‘You Don’t Own Me’ PSA’ and political power

The “‘You Don’t Own Me” PSA’ uses the song’s messages of autonomy and female empowerment to encourage direct political action. It combines the audio of Lesley Gore’s 1963 recording of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ with a video montage of over sixty different women lip-syncing to the lyrics to create a public service announcement about the state of women’s issues in the world of US politics. It was published on YouTube and Vimeo on 22 October 2012, fifteen days before the presidential election between incumbent President Barack Obama and former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney. The video description urges the average female voter to deny Romney and the Republican Party her vote on the basis of their conservative, sexist views and intended policies: ‘Mitt Romney and the Republican Party are determined to overturn Roe V. Wade. Romney has not supported equal pay for women (The Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act). Romney has vowed to defund Planned Parenthood. Romney has vowed to repeal the Affordable Care Act. Romney doesn’t want health care to cover birth control. Romney says same sex marriage should be banned with

34 Flicker, “‘You Don’t Own Me” PSA.’
a Constitutional Amendment. The description explains the importance of voting for Obama in the upcoming election to defend and develop these progressive, feminist causes. It was created by activist Sarah Sophie Flicker, who spoke to independent magazine Paper about how being ‘horrified by the news, the repeated attacks on women’s rights, and the anti-women sentiment pouring out from the [Republican party] generally’ and ‘struck by the fact that we are teetering dangerously close to a situation where my daughter won’t have the same rights I’ve enjoyed my entire life’ led her and her peers to create this video.

The idea that this version honours the song’s original message of female empowerment is substantiated when Gore herself appears at the beginning of the video and says, ‘I’m Lesley Gore, and I approve this message.’ This endorsement adds greater credibility and weight to the PSA’s agenda, as does her afterword at the end (2:30): ‘I recorded “You Don’t Own Me” in 1964. It’s hard for me to believe, but we’re still fighting for the same things we were then. Yes, ladies, we’ve gotta come together, get out there and vote, and protect our bodies. They’re ours. Please vote.’ Here, the video’s call to action is made more potent by her direct wording, sincere delivery and persuasive language, much like her vocal performance when she recorded the song forty-eight years earlier. A similarly striking moment occurs at 2:20, when the lip-sync montage is interrupted by the last of ten text graphics that are spaced throughout the video. Set in pale blue uppercase text, centred on a black background, the words ‘WHEN WOMEN VOTE / WOMEN WIN!’ appear as Gore sings ‘That’s all I ask of you.’ The synchronisation of these lyrics with this simply worded graphic is a compelling part of the PSA’s appeal to eligible voters.

During the montage of lip-sync footage, several placards are held up displaying slogans such as ‘get your ROSARIES off my OVARIES’ (0:56) and ‘MY BODY IS NOT A BATTLEGROUND’ (1:10). These slogans call attention to the reproductive rights that viewers are implored to defend with their votes, while also highlighting the song’s themes of autonomy. Like the video description, they encourage an interpretation of the lyrics that

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35 Flicker, “You Don’t Own Me” PSA.
centres around women claiming ownership of their bodies; lines like ‘You don’t own me’ and ‘I love to be free / To live my life the way that I want’ are especially pertinent here. The use of Madara and White’s lyrics to refer to a particular kind of freedom and encourage a particular kind of political action demonstrates the openness to interpretation that makes the song so powerful.

The participants in the PSA are predominantly women who work in the arts and fashion industries—musicians, actors, writers, models, artists, designers and filmmakers among them—appearing against an informal backdrop such as a bedroom wall or living room. The visually diverse cast includes several celebrities, such as model Alexa Chung and actors Lena Dunham and Tracee Ellis Ross. The low resolution and amateur style of the footage presents even these more well-known participants in a casual, down-to-earth light that enhances the PSA’s everywoman message and matches the first-person perspective of the lyrics. While the inclusion of famous faces functions as a celebrity endorsement, their celebrity is not highlighted, portraying a potent sisterhood that transcends boundaries of fame. Combined with the collage of faces towards the end of the song (shown in Figure 16), this emphasises one of the points the video strives to argue: that these issues affect all women in the United States, and thus, all women should take political action for their own benefit.
Resistance Revival Chorus: surviving and thriving together

The Resistance Revival Chorus released a cover version of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ in January 2018, only a little over five years after the “You Don’t Own Me” PSA came out. The messages of the two versions bear some similarities, such as opposition to Republicans and a focus on women, but the Chorus’s version exists in response to a significantly different political context. The description of the cover’s lyric video explains that the Chorus was ‘launched in Summer 2017 in response to the Trump presidency’. This was the political victory of a man who had made headlines during his election campaign for bragging about

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37 Resistance Revival Chorus, ‘You Don’t Own Me.’
38 Interestingly, Sarah Sophie Flicker is also a founding member of the Chorus, meaning that she has played a significant role in promoting ‘You Don’t Own Me’ as an American fourth-wave feminist anthem.
sexually assaulting women. It is fitting, then, that the Chorus would revive ‘You Don’t Own Me’ to act as an anthem for resisting sexual violence on a national scale. The lyric video’s description clarifies the purpose of both the Chorus and its cover:

The Resistance Revival Chorus is a collective of more than 50 women who join together to breathe joy and song into the resistance, and to uplift and center women’s voices.

The release marks the anniversary of The Women’s March. In addition, the Chorus aims to raise awareness around #METOO, #TIMESUP, and women who’ve been victims of sexual violence. They are encouraging fans to donate and support Tarana Burke’s organization, metooMVMT.org.

The group is largely dedicated to live performances of protest songs. A Medium article published by the Chorus entitled ‘Resistance Revival Chorus Tool Kit’ encourages readers to form similar groups all over the United States and provides membership criteria: ‘The chorus is comprised of people who identify as women. We are trans-inclusive and also inclusive of women who identify as gender non-conforming. … Age is no bar for the chorus. Whoever is passionate, dedicated and engaged, and has the stamina for some real fun, physical performances, is welcome.’ This focus on inclusivity and dedication signifies that a sense of sisterhood is the most important part of singing together and clarifies that the Chorus aims for passionate, accessible protests rather than highly choreographed presentations. This aim lends itself to simple arrangements and a less virtuosic performance style, which puts the highlight on the messages of the lyrics and of the movement. As discussed earlier in my musical analysis of ‘You Don’t Own Me’, the ‘singable’ simplicity of its lyrics, melodies and chords makes it widely accessible, and its openness to interpretation makes it widely adaptable. In this sense, the song is a fitting choice for the Chorus’s first studio recording.

41 Resistance Revival Chorus, ‘You Don’t Own Me (Lyric Video),’
The song also reflects the focus of the Chorus’s activism. As noted above, the group takes a stand against rape culture in their promotion of two overlapping movements: #MeToo, which raises awareness of sexual abuse, and #TimesUp, which demands action against harassment in the workplace. These explicit links to feminist causes infuse this cover of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ with activist intent, and this context allows the lyrics to be reframed in meaningful ways. ‘I’m not just one of your many toys / You don’t own me / Don’t say I can’t go with other boys’ can be read as a message to a sexual predator; ‘I’m young and I love to be young / I’m free and I love to be free / To live my life the way I want / To say and do whatever I please’ becomes a series of affirmations to aid the process of healing from sexual trauma. The day before the cover was released, the Chorus and several female pop musicians joined singer/songwriter Kesha at the 60th Annual Grammy Awards ceremony to perform her song ‘Praying’, which has similar lyrical themes of defiance and self-actualisation: ‘Cause I can make it on my own, oh / And I don’t need you, I found a strength I’ve never known’. The Chorus releasing ‘You Don’t Own Me’ in the wake of this performance not only gives their cover higher profile, but grants it greater significance as a survivors’ anthem. As co-lead singer Meah Pace explained to Yahoo Music journalist Lyndsey Parker shortly after the cover’s release:

It’s a message, a strong message. It’s what we wanted to get out first, to get moving with this movement. We as individuals, as women, have to be confident and know that we own ourselves. We own our bodies. We own our minds. And it’s OK for us to choose to not be victims. That gives us the strength and the courage to continue with this movement. We’re about community. We’re about taking up for each other and speaking for each other. So that’s what this is about. It’s about all of us standing together and really having a voice.

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Adaptable feminism and the devil in the details

The fact that these empowering renditions of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ change none—or very few—of the lyrics is a testament to the potential of Lesley Gore’s original recording of Madara and White’s composition. Indeed, part of the power of the song comes from the opportunity it gives people to project their own context onto it as they listen. This power was valuable during the golden age of girl group music; as Douglas points out, the proliferation of transistor radios made music more portable, and therefore more personal. These songs could now be physically present in a teenage girl’s life, playing in her bedroom as she tried on clothes and explored new methods of self-expression, serving as a soundtrack to important moments of confrontation or reflection.\(^45\) The generalisations in ‘You Don’t Own Me’ made it a suitable candidate for such a soundtrack: the most detailed information we learn about the narrator’s boyfriend is that he’s inclined to parade her around like a trophy and forbid her to play the field, and that he treats several others in a similar way. In comparison, the many things we learn about G-Eazy’s character include his favourite luxury brand, his flirting preferences, and his penchant for recreational drugs. None of these specificities is inherently harmful, or indicative of someone being a bad person; it’s just that a landmark renewal of an enduring 1960s female-empowerment anthem is the wrong time and the wrong place to harp on about what a man wants. Because these new, more specific lyrics add a new dimension to the existing ones, the listener doesn’t get that same uninterrupted opportunity to imagine the lyrics in their own context; G-Eazy’s verses dictate the context for them. If this cover is aiming to revitalise the original’s significance and status as a classic, then why strip it of its universality?

In comparison, while the other cover versions explored in this chapter put the song into a particular setting, the details of these contexts aren’t made explicit in the lyrics. When the song is used in *The First Wives Club*, it becomes partially about treasuring sisterhood, moving on from heartbreak and finding self-confidence; the 2012 election PSA makes it about bodily autonomy and political choices; the version by the Resistance Revival Chorus makes it about resistance within America’s tumultuous political climate as well as the fight against sexual violence. And yet, all of these versions are equally accessible to listeners

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\(^{45}\) Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 86.
searching for inspiration in Madara and White’s lyrics. These versions carry the song forward into new feminist contexts without making glaring additions to the original lyrics or contradicting their message, because they don’t have to. While at first glance ‘You Don’t Own Me’ is a girl telling off a possessive and clingy boyfriend, the lyrics’ openness for interpretation has allowed musicians to give it new meaning throughout its history. The specifics can change with the times, but the song’s core values of self-confidence and independence have earned it a rich musical legacy.
Epilogue: past, present and future

The two works I explore in this thesis are certainly not the only well-written, complex songs that have been interpreted in different ways since their origin in girl group music. The Crystals’ ‘He Hit Me (And It Felt Like a Kiss)’ is one example that deserves more scholarly attention. Its lyrics reframe an act of intimate partner violence as proof of true love, accompanied by the haunting, uncomfortable atmosphere of Phil Spector’s instrumental arrangement.¹ This song has not been as widely covered—if anything, it has been avoided—but its existing covers construct a variety of dynamics and attitudes in their treatment of the source material. The recording by indie rock band Grizzly Bear, with gay male lead singer Ed Droste leaving the ‘he’ pronouns of the lyrics unchanged, paints a disturbingly beautiful picture of abuse in queer relationships; alternative singer-songwriter Nicole Dollanganger interpolates the first line of the Crystals’ recording in her eerie, sickly-sweet depiction of a dominant/submissive relationship.² Even the question of morality in propagating the song’s normalisation of abuse by recording cover versions has the potential to provoke discourse. This is especially timely given the ongoing revelations about the widespread normalisation of sexual abuse that triggered the #MeToo and Time’s Up movements, and there is room to take this discussion up more seriously in popular music scholarship.

Another possible jumping-off point is the importance of how ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ helped its teenage listeners navigate their sexuality and the accompanying feelings of confusion, excitement, and fear. An updated consideration of adolescent anxieties can be found in twenty-first-century teen dramas: television shows like Degrassi: The Next Generation (2001–2015), The O.C. (2003–2007), Gossip Girl (2007–2012), and Skins (2007–2013) depict their young characters experiencing complicated, intense feelings about sex and sexuality. Music plays an important role in communicating how they feel about these topics, and thus influences how a viewer projecting their own identity onto their fictional counterpart should feel about their own experiences. A similar argument to

¹ The Crystals, ‘He Hit Me (And It Felt Like A Kiss),’ Spotify, Philles Records, 1962.
the one I make for ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ can be made for these shows; while their depictions of teenage sexuality have been met with controversy, they provide important representation of identities and dynamics that teenage girls can ‘try on’ in the safety of their own imagination.³

There is also great potential for further scholarship into the various ways that musicians have treated the gendered language in the lyrics of ‘You Don’t Own Me’, namely ‘Don’t say I can’t go with other boys’. Some artists and bands with male lead singers maintain a heterosexual identity in their cover versions by changing ‘boys’ to ‘girls’ and sometimes ‘toys’ to ‘pearls’, while others do it by changing the line to ‘Don’t treat me like other boys’.⁴ Conversely, other musicians use the line to telegraph a queer identity. Performance artist Klaus Nomi changes the wording to ‘Don’t say I can’t play with other boys’, his voice rising into an angry shout that evokes the frustration and pain of enduring homophobia.⁵ Folk singer-songwriter and social justice advocate Heather Bishop changes the line to ‘Don’t say I can’t go without the boys’, her sonorous contralto delivering this defence of her queerness with quiet assurance.⁶ With the additional context that Gore herself came out as a lesbian in 2005, the concept of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ functioning as a queer anthem is a compelling topic that warrants deeper academic discussion.⁷

In this sense, the more intimate narrative of ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ is especially adaptable due to its lack of gendered pronouns. There are hundreds of versions recorded by musicians in a diverse range of contexts, which creates opportunities for further research into the different ways that people have interpreted this deeply personal narrative. One


⁴ For examples of these gendered changes, see versions by Brian Poole and the Tremeloes (1965), Bo Donaldson and the Heywoods (1972), The Ormsby Brothers (1973), Demis Roussos (1995), and Electra (2011).

⁵ Klaus Nomi, performer, ‘Klaus Nomi "You Don't Own Me ",’ uploaded by Klaus Nomi on 9 April 2012, YouTube video, 5:04, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6wpsjqn16w.

⁶ Heather Bishop, ‘You Don't Own Me,’ track 4 on A Taste of the Blues, Spotify, Mother of Pearl Records, 1986.

potential direction is to explore the versions performed from a male perspective—the first of which was released by Mike Berry and The Outlaws just two months after the Shirelles’ recording—in relation to the kinds of ‘crossings’ that Griffiths discusses in his writing on identity in cover versions.\(^8\) Consider, for example, one of the most recent covers, released by singer and lyricist Marty Straub. Straub recorded it as a tribute to his wife of forty-one years, explaining in the video description his decision to write additional lyrics: ‘Since I sing it about my wife and I don’t want the love to end, I added a conclusion of forever.’ He made significant changes to the lyrics to express long-lasting adoration, shared personal growth and a sense of certainty about the future that complements the anxiety expressed in the existing lyrics. This culminates in the final verse: ‘So now we grow together / Our lives a lasting treasure / And now we know forever is our love / And you’ll still love me tomorrow / Yes, you will still love me tomorrow.’\(^9\) This creates a satisfying sequel to the song’s original narrative, while also highlighting the sincerity and adaptability woven through Goffin’s lyrics; they can be sung by everyone from teenagers to sexagenarians, across a range of life experiences and gender identities, and still ring true.

Even during the process of writing this thesis, a flood of covers of both ‘You Don’t Own Me’ and ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’ have been released. Though this has perhaps made it more difficult to keep track of the songs’ genealogies, these more recent interpretations have made my research richer: they demonstrate the staying power of not only two celebrated songs, but the tradition of cover versions itself. Many were facsimiles of an existing rendition—several were clearly intended to draw in fans of the Grace and G-Eazy version, and a few recordings from reality shows like The Voice tended to blur together—but naturally, there were some standouts. Some were admirably philanthropic or imaginative, while others were borderline horrifying. I wish to explore them briefly here to give a sense of what musicians are doing with these songs in contemporary times.

The newer recordings of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ contrast starkly with each other; for a while, the most recently released track entitled ‘You Don’t Own Me’ was by independent rapper

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\(^8\) ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’, SecondHandSongs; Griffiths, Popular Music Studies.

Iamkmd on 27 February 2019. This cover samples the first verse of Lesley Gore’s recording on top of a hip-hop beat and intersperses it with Iamkmd rapping over a looped sample of the original introduction. The lyrics begin with ‘I’m the type to smack a bitch in the face / go from base to base / leave my kids on her face’. This fairly accurately exemplifies the tone of the rest of the lyrics, which also threaten effeminate gay men whilst repeatedly insulting all the other rappers in the industry. Sonically and lyrically, the song is reminiscent of Eminem’s ‘Untitled’, which uses a similar sample as a refrain but a different song title; in comparison, Iamkmd entitling his version ‘You Don’t Own Me’ places it in the context of the song’s legacy that I discussed in Chapter 2. There is a striking contrast between Iamkmd’s violently misogynistic and homophobic lyrics and the many ways that ‘You Don’t Own Me’ has been powerful for feminist and queer advocacy. While no artist is obligated to interpret a work a certain way, it was maddening to see this version take down such an iconic, empowering song.

Then came a version by Seattle indie band Deep Sea Diver that used the power of the source material towards a feminist cause. The cover, featuring guest vocalist Natalie Schepman of the band Joseph, was released as a charity single on the band’s Bandcamp page to celebrate International Women’s Day 2019. All proceeds are listed as going to The S.H.E. (Safe, Healthy, Empowered) clinic, ‘a mobile service that provides quality, trauma-informed and non-judgmental health care for women along Aurora Avenue, many of whom are unhoused, drug dependent, and marginalized in Seattle.’ This is not the first time a cover of ‘You Don’t Own Me’ has raised money for charity; the UK group Urban Voices Collective collaborated with classical-crossover string quartet Bond on a cover version in 2018 for a similar financial purpose. The description of this version’s music video on YouTube, which includes footage from the most recent March for Women event, lists that ‘Proceeds from the song will go to CARE, whose work includes empowering women and girls worldwide, ensuring women and girls can exercise their rights and live a life free from

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violence.’ By facilitating a direct financial contribution to causes that care for women and girls, the Urban Voices Collective and Deep Sea Diver recordings develop the song’s message of autonomy and freedom into an opportunity for tangible feminist action.

Most recently, as I was putting the finishing touches on this thesis, actor and singer Kristin Chenoweth released ‘You Don’t Own Me’ as a duet with pop singer Ariana Grande. This rendition is part of Chenoweth’s album For The Girls, a collection of cover versions that pays tribute to empowered, era-defining women in the music industry. Chenoweth sees this album as a way to connect to past and future female performers, and to let them ‘know the respect and love I have for them.’ For The Girls also features a cover of ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow’; Chenoweth sings all the lead vocals on this occasion, joined by sparse and understated backing vocals. The arrangement echoes Carole King’s slower, more contemplative rendition from Tapestry rather than the Shirelles’ upbeat original, implying that King is the ‘empowered, era-defining’ woman to which the cover is a testament, but the introduction of a romantic string section in the second verse weaves in a trace of the girl group sound that helped the song first reach success.

The inclusion of these two songs on an album entitled For The Girls not only speaks to each song’s status as a pop classic, but also hearkens back to a central characteristic of girl group music: that it was sung by girls, for girls, about topics that matter to girls. The lyric video for the ‘You Don’t Own Me’ duet employs a retro, cartoonish art style that’s reminiscent of the opening credits of The First Wives Club, the source of the uplifting choreographed rendition I discussed in Chapter 2. The aesthetic homage to a cover version from twenty-

16 Carole King, ‘Will You Love Me Tomorrow.’
17 Kristin Chenoweth and Ariana Grande, performers, ‘Kristin Chenoweth - You Don’t Own Me (Lyric Video) ft. Ariana Grande,’ uploaded by Kristin Chenoweth on 26 September 2019, YouTube video, 3:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7gJLWM0YU.
three years ago highlights the intergenerational significance of what this song has come to mean, as does the duet between fifty-one-year-old Chenoweth and twenty-six-year-old Grande; there may be a quarter of a century between the singers, but they can find common ground in this song.\footnote{Additionally, \textit{The First Wives Club} is one of Grande’s favourite movies. Ariana Grande (@ArianaGrande), ‘first wives club is the greatest movie ever,’ Twitter, 15 September 2014, 10:22 a.m. JST, https://twitter.com/arianagrande/status/511324245809315840.} This sense of sisterhood helped make Lesley Gore’s original recording a powerful feminist text for its teenage listeners, and the rich legacy of anthemic empowerment woven into the song’s history has only made it stronger.

No matter the scope or the slant of the study, the heart of the matter is that adaptation will always change what music means. A song can begin as a teenage girl nervously expressing new feelings of lust, and, through slight adjustments, become a different girl seducing one of many beaus or another girl swooning in an emotional whirlwind. It can be interpreted as both an assertion of independence and self-worth, and an invitation for an entitled misogynist to start bragging. It can start as ‘a woman telling a man off’ and grow into a radiant choir of feminist justice.\footnote{Madara, ‘John Madara’s Greatest Hits.’} The difference is in the details. The power is not only in the hands of the performers, arrangers and producers who make these changes, but in those of the listener who filters it through their own experiences. Engaging with a musical work as either artist or audience generates meanings upon meanings—within meanings—despite meanings—and only makes pop music more intricate and multifaceted as the years go on. Truly, as long as there is good music being written and people to hear it, the tradition of cover versions will help build the legacies of songs that should never be forgotten.
Appendix 1: Promotional poster for T.A.M.I. Show

Promotional poster for *T.A.M.I. Show* (1964).²⁰

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