

Laura Jane Grace: “True Trans Soul Rebel”

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Abstract:

On a cold May night in Durham, North Carolina, Laura Jane Grace stepped out on stage to meet a roaring crowd in the tightly packed Motorco Music Hall. Pulling out her birth certificate emblazoned with her birth name, “Thomas James Gabel,” she raised the document high for all to see before defiantly lighting it on fire. As Grace waived out the smoldering paper, she shouted, “Goodbye gender!”

Long before either Grace’s coming out, or the release of Against Me!’s 2014 album, *Transgender Dysphoria Blues*, the band has been reshaping contemporary conceptions of protest music. The punk group first rose to fame within their circles in the early 2000s, but have since experienced more widespread attention following Grace’s public transition. The singer has made no efforts to alter the sound of her deep, raspy shout, maintaining that, “this too is what a woman sounds like.”

Grace has been a pivotal figure in bridging the popular music scene to transgender equality issues. This piece discusses the artist’s construction of a trans-female identity in the punk community and in relation to the turbulent social-political climate faced by LGBTQ individuals. In exploring Grace’s gender nonconformity in a musical community dominated by masculinity, I consider cultural expectations of gender, performed both visually and aurally, and the ways in which Grace uses her stance as an empowered public female figure to transgress cultural expectations and draw large-scale awareness to contemporary human rights topics.

1 On a cold May 2016 night in Durham, North Carolina, Laura Jane Grace and the rest of Against Me! stepped out on stage to meet a roaring crowd in the tightly packed Motorco Music Hall. As the players grabbed their instruments and prepared to start the show, Grace paused. Pulling out her birth certificate, emblazoned with her birth name, “Thomas James Gabel,” she raised the document high for all to see, before proudly and defiantly lighting it on fire. Just as Grace waived out the smoldering paper, shouting, “Goodbye gender!,” the band tore off into their first tune of the night, “Burn,” from their 2001 EP, *Crime, as forgiven by Against Me!*. The audience continued to cheer and began to dance and shout along to an old, favorite anthem: “And it’ll burn burn burn like they did to the Anarchists, and it’ll burn burn burn like the histories they stole from us!”

2 Grace and her band’s intrepid actions from that night in Durham are far from unprecedented, as any long-term Against Me! fan would know. A near twenty year legacy precedes the group’s most recent album, *Shape Shift with Me* (September 2016)—two decades

that canonized the band's politically charged, rhythmically driving, raw punk anthems. Grace chose to first reveal her intention to transition genders in 2012 in a remarkably public way: published in the *Rolling Stone* article, "The Secret Life of Transgender Rocker Tom Gabel" (Eells). In January of 2014, the band released their first album following announcement of Grace's transition, *Transgender Dysphoria Blues*. While Grace has since changed her appearance to align more with conventional markers of femininity, her vocal timbre remains unaltered—consistent with her gritty, harsh sound and low pitch range heard on Against Me!'s previous albums. Grace has made no intentional efforts to change the range or sound of her raspy shout, maintaining that "this too is what a woman sounds like" ("Hi, I'm Laura Jane Grace. Ask Me Anything.").

3 An exploration of Laura Jane Grace's construction of a trans female identity in the punk community, a musical sphere dominated by masculinity, helps to shed light on the importance of her contributions made as a political activist and an LGBTQ rights advocate. As one of the first major musical icons to publicly come out as transgender, Grace and her experiences provide a glimpse into the journeys of gender variant individuals, their construction and articulation of identity, and the ways in which these identities are interpreted and understood within a binary mainstream cultural framework. The following essay looks closely at how Grace has shaped her trans-female identity in a male-centric music scene and dichotomously gendered society, by considering the ways in which identity can be communicated and understood through visual and sonic performative cues of gender, hegemonic cultural norms, and the influence of media depiction.

4 During the fifteen years preceding Grace's transition, Against Me! released a large body of recordings including albums, demos, and EPs that canonized the band's strong political stance, raw recording quality, and driving rhythms, topped with Grace's impassioned, rallying shout. With the announcement of the singer's decision to transition, many long-time listeners feared a loss of the voice they had come to associate with the band's specific sound. In the months following Grace's coming-out, interviewers followed up with a frenzy of questions, attempting to sort out a new understanding of Grace's identity. In a 2013 radio interview for the Kevin and Bean Show, host Kevin Ryder bluntly asked, "Why is your voice so similar to how it used to be? I think a lot of people would be expecting you to sound more like a woman." In response, Grace mused, "Well, what does a woman sound like, you know? That's all interpretive

or opinion, but I mean my voice is my voice, I don't feel ashamed of my voice in any way and especially with my singing voice" ("Kevin & Bean Interview Against Me!").

5 In the multitude of interviews given since her coming out, Grace has made a point of reassuring Against Me! listeners that the rough edge of her vocal timbre would not be lost during her transition. "The [hormone replacement therapy] won't change my voice [...] only surgery can do that—but I like my singing voice, so I don't really care about that" ("Hi, I'm Laura Jane Grace. Ask Me Anything"). In many cases, those assigned female at birth transitioning to male may notice changes in vocal timbre as a result of the thickening and ossification of the vocal cords catalyzed by testosterone hormone replacement therapy, not unlike the changes that take place during male adolescence (Constansis). Alternatively, adults transitioning from male to female using estrogen hormone replacement therapy do *not* experience a vocal shift at a physiological level, as the resulting vocal changes from puberty are irreversible. Although Grace has chosen not to, some transgender women opt for voice-altering surgeries, such as the pitch heightening tracheal shave. In some cases, others may seek professional voice coaching from speech therapists who offer programs geared towards the replication of socially recognized gendered speech patterns, inflections, and cadences, specifically for those in the process of gender transition.

6 The unrestrained expression of emotion has long been associated with women's musical performance, while conversely, artists applauded for their machismo are more often read as stoic and controlled. Popular music scholar Stan Hawkins confirms, "It is well known that the regulation of emotional display through all forms of artistic expression determines the tightly regulated behavioral patterns in males" (204). Put plainly, Grace's singing style and stage presence have rarely, if ever, fit this paradigm of careful regulation. In the 2002 track, "Scream Until You're Coughing up Blood," the strain in her voice during the entirely shouted song is so audible that as it builds in intensity, the scream goes from controlled pitch to an entirely wild and unbridled expression of angst. The pain in Grace's voice is practically tangible at that moment—the relatable experience of screaming, "until you're coughing up blood." (*Against Me! Is Reinventing Axl Rose*)

7 Oddly enough, some listeners have identified what they deem to be a new emotive quality in Grace's singing on *Transgender Dysphoria Blues*. In an interview for her network, Shaw TV reporter Tracy Koga insisted, "Just the sound in your voice is different in this one.

There's a lot of, I think, *raw emotion* in this new album." Chuckling, Grace complied, "Sure, yeah. I think maybe the sound of my voice has more been affected by years of smoking cigarettes and drinking whiskey, but you know, sure" ("Laura Jane Grace of Against Me! Interview and Acoustic on Shaw TV"). Koga implies "raw emotion" as a characteristic of what she hears to be Grace's "new" sound, and possibly unknowingly connects unabashed displays of emotion to markers of femininity, despite the existing catalog of equally unrestrained moments of passion captured on many earlier Against Me! recordings.

8 A discussion of the context in which both Ryder and Koga frame their understandings of Grace's gender identity is an imperative part of the conversation regarding transgender and gender nonconforming identities. The questions raised by both interviewers imply a dichotomous view of gender as male or female, a binary that has long been entrenched within our culture. A presumed understanding of transgender experiences within this framework would imply an individual's complete shift from one pole to another—conventionally male to female, or female to male. A widening of this narrow view, however, reveals the exclusion of many sorts of variant sexualities and genders left out of a binary system, including (but not limited to) individuals born intersex, gender nonconforming people, and those identified as agender. If gender and sex are to be seen as fluid as opposed to polar, the issues that arise surrounding the conflict between Grace's appearance (read: feminine) and voice (read: masculine) can be ameliorated.

9 In a closer investigation of the differences between male and female voices, we might find ourselves wondering where the influences of nature and nurture begin to split. Is the voice of a person assigned female at birth irrevocably heard and understood as female because of the development of the muscles that produce the sound, along with other physiological predispositions? How much of a woman's voice is heard as such because of the *way* she talks, sings, or makes sound? In her paramount work *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler theorizes gender as a performative act, rather than a predetermined biological assignment. Her article "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," asserts:

[...] gender is a performance that produces the illusion of an inner sex or essence or psychic gender core; it produces on the skin, through the gesture, the move, the gait (that array of corporeal theatrics understood as gender presentation), the illusion of an inner depth (28).

Musicologist Freya Jarman-Ivens expands upon Butler's discussion in her book, *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw*. Jarman-Ivens suggests that vocal performativity

also be included in what Butler describes as the “corporeal theatrics” of performed gender cues. “Although it is less visible,” says Jarman-Ivens, “the voice is nonetheless complicit in the theatrics of gender, and a voice that does not comply with the visible signs of gender is as disruptive to the performance of gender as any other, silent sign could be” (20). It is precisely this disruption between voice and body—in conjunction with Grace’s decision to embody certain markers of femininity while rejecting others—that creates her unique identity, a new assertion of what it means to be a woman.

10 Grace’s change in gender presentation has affected her stance as a musician in the punk world, a hegemonically masculine realm born of transgressive counterculture and anti-establishment ideals. Despite the progressive politics and emphasis on inclusion promoted by many sub-groups of punk culture, punk’s most prominent and successful bands are mostly (if not entirely) male—and quite conventionally so. For decades, female punk musicians have experienced far less mainstream recognition than their male counterparts, as evidenced by *Rolling Stone*’s “Readers Poll: The Best Punk Rock Bands of All Time,” which features ten all-male groups (Greene), and *LA Weekly*’s list of “Top 20 Punk Albums in History,” which is not much better.

11 Naturally, in a musical arena saturated with male groups, visual and sonic markers of masculinity have become entangled with punk music and posturing, and can often be seen in the performance practices of both male *and* female artists. Caroline O’Meara’s article, “The Raincoats: Breaking down Punk Rock’s Masculinities,” identifies these markers—“loud, guttural singing and aggressive stage posturing”—as distinctly male elements of punk music, a “macho posturing” that can exist both in the performance and lyrics of punk, she notes (299-313). Punk scholar and expert Craig O’Hara adds that unemotional and serious self-presentation, another common masculine trope in punk performance, is often interpreted as a display of power by male musicians. Arguing that women artists have embraced similar performance styles in order to enhance their own demonstrations of power, O’Hara states boldly, “As much as men do not want to relinquish that power, many women seek to gain it by adopting stereotypically male characteristics” (105). The critical consumer of punk music might detach these performances of power from maleness, instead understanding this aggressive style as a non-gendered marker of punk expression. Whether or not O’Hara’s assertion holds any bearing in regard to power dynamic between musicians, the tropes he identifies are indeed pervasive within the genre, and

Grace has noted changes in her own interactions with the community since beginning to present as a woman.

12 In a radio interview with National Public Radio's Rachel Martin, Grace explained her relentless struggle with gender dysphoria prior to coming out:

[...] that's where the disconnect was happening for me: being on stage and being featured in magazines where you're essentially competing with other male singers. Rock 'n' roll, or punk rock, it's a boy's club in a lot of ways, and you're out there with your photo side-by-side with these other people that you're supposed to measure up to. And I didn't. I wasn't one of those dudes ("Laura Jane Grace, Transgender Punk, on Life in Transition").

Grace's anxieties about gender roles have been mitigated by her change in presentation. She states,

Deciding to transition has been really liberating as an artist, especially on stage. I feel like it's just okay to be me and I don't have to measure up to some popular perception of what a 'front man' does. Which before had been extremely dysphoria inducing ("Hi, I'm Laura Jane Grace. Ask Me Anything").

Here, the singer expresses the previous discomfort she experienced appearing on stage, locked into a preset paradigm of expectations for male punk artists. Interestingly, not much about Grace's physical or sonic performance style has changed since she first came out nearly five years ago. Her physical stance remains powerful and assertive: legs apart, her arm pumps up and down as she aggressively strums her guitar. She runs and jumps forcefully across the stage, sweating and shouting. Head banging in time with the rest of Against Me!, her long hair tangles and the sweat pours from her face, her black eye makeup smudged and running. Maintaining her aggressive and energetic physical stage presence in addition to her low pitched, harsh vocal timbre, Grace's own construction of womanhood rejects a number of conventional feminine traits, yet celebrates her autonomy over her own gender identity.

13 A 2012 video of Against Me! performing at FYF Fest 2012 in Los Angeles, was one of the first visual recordings of the band released (albeit unprofessionally) following Grace's coming out ("Against Me! - Drinking With The Jocks - live FYF Fest, September 2, 2012"). In the video, the band performs their new song, "Drinking With The Jocks"—a tongue-in-cheek parody of hegemonic masculinity—prior to its studio release on *Transgender Dysphoria Blues* in 2014. Musically, "Drinking With The Jocks" is similar in style to many early Against Me! recordings. Grace plays a two bar introduction on her loud, heavily distorted guitar. The verse begins with the stiff outline of the rigid meter on the tom-tom drums and cymbals as bass and

rhythm guitar enter. Grace's shout is so strained that the words are nearly indistinguishable as she forcefully presses the lyrics out. She screams:

I'm drinking with the jocks, I'm laughing at the faggots.
Just like one of the boys, Swinging my dick in my hand!
(*Transgender Dysphoria Blues*).

Grace stands front and center, between the band's rhythm guitarist and bassist. As the camera pans from one end of the stage to the next, it becomes apparent that, despite her short, sleeveless dress, tights, and shoulder length hair, Grace's posture matches her male band mates'. She stands with her feet apart, her head and shoulders somewhat slumped over her guitar. Her right arm moves aggressively as she pounds out chords, occasionally she steps back from her microphone to bob her head and upper body to the beat. Grace's performance style at FYF Fest—and in numerous live performances since 2012—is largely unchanged from that of her earlier years presenting as male. Although the artist claims her sounds, movements, and posturing as part of her identity as a woman, many mainstream listeners still grapple with this fluid conception of gender roles and traits, and some media sources have carefully controlled their video and photographic depictions of Grace to align with traditional conventions of femininity.

14 In October of 2014, AOL premiered a new online series, *True Trans: With Laura Jane Grace*, centered around Grace's gender transition and the interpersonal connections she has forged along the way with other transgender people. At face value, the show appears to be a progressive and inspirational response to contemporary social issues, but the application of a critical lens reveals subtle controversies worth investigating. Starkly different from nearly all live Against Me! performance footage, *True Trans* favors closely-framed shots that reveal Grace as demure, made-up and manicured, distinctly feminine. Editors sandwich footage of the calm and composed Grace of today between shots of a young Tom Gable, aggressively striking chords on the guitar and shouting into the microphone, highlighting conventional signifiers of masculinity. In doing so, this juxtaposition emphasizes a hyper-masculinized portrayal of Grace against an austere serene and feminine one.

15 The short episodes of *True Trans* (each around 7:00-11:00 minutes in length) are laid out in a documentary-like style, alternating between band shots, footage of Grace interacting with others, and individual interviews. The scenes in which the singer is interviewed alone are often framed tightly around her face, either from chest or shoulder height up. Grace appears to be

wearing mascara and dark eyeliner or shadow. Her skin looks smooth, her eyebrows are precisely groomed, and her long hair is always worn down, cascading across the side of her face.

16 Interestingly, Grace's actual stage presence (as discussed previously) is decidedly the opposite of her depiction in both the interview scenes and live footage clips spliced into *True Trans*. Regularly throughout the series, Grace is shown sitting on a stool in an empty room, playing solo reductions of Against Me! songs on her guitar. In these scenes, the camera zooms in on Grace's face—her head is often turned sideways, hair hanging down over her shoulder as she plays, she never looks directly into the camera. These clips feature close up shots of Grace's hands as she strums, exhibiting her manicured nails painted a light shade of lavender. Editing choices such as these convey a softer side of the singer, stripped away from her usual world of the upbeat and aggressive settings of Against Me! shows. She appears as the sensitive singer-songwriter type, revealed in her private world, supposedly free of the costuming and posturing of public performances.

17 Laura Jane Grace proudly identifies as a woman, but she has chosen to refute many traditional markers of femininity, instead constructing her own identity as a transgender punk woman. Still, in many instances, the media struggles to box Grace into a traditional framework of binary gender. In the same way that Tracy Koga hears a new "raw emotion" in Grace's unaltered singing voice, the editors of *True Trans* carefully select footage and images of Grace that appear most feminine, adhering to the heteronormative expectations of what someone "becoming" a woman "should" embody. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler asserts that culturally constructed understandings of gender are forced onto bodies to fit these dichotomous understandings of male and female. Butler states:

On some accounts, the notion that gender is constructed suggests a certain determinism of gender meanings inscribed on anatomically differentiated bodies, where those bodies are understood as passive recipients of an inexorable cultural law. When the relevant "culture" that "constructs" gender is understood in terms of such a law or set of laws, then it seems that gender is as determined and fixed as it was under the biology-is-destiny formulation. In such a case, not biology, but culture, becomes destiny (12).

By this set of cultural expectations, if Grace claims her body and self as female, she must follow with additional markers and prescribed characteristics of that gender in order to be perceived and culturally accepted as a woman. Many choices in the way that Grace is portrayed in *True Trans* reflects the producers' inflation of these conventional markers of femininity. The close-up shots

revealing Grace's makeup and manicured hands, demure posture, and peaceful solitary guitar playing seem classically feminine. The decision to film Grace covering Against Me! songs without her famous vocals wards off any sonic signifiers of masculinity that Grace might also embody, convincing viewers of the authenticity and completeness of her transition to female.

18 In Episode 7 of *True Trans*, producers juxtapose footage of Laura Jane Grace of 2014 alongside old video of the singer from her time identified as Tom Gabel, presenting as male. In an interview clip, Grace's made-up face is closely framed as she explains, "the threat of violence to trans women as opposed to trans men speaks a lot to male privilege [...]." Immediately, the visual cuts to a clip of an early Against Me! performance in which Gabel is shouting and playing guitar. Brow furrowed, dripping with sweat he makes blunt, aggressive movements while he plays. Over this image, Grace continues speaking: "[...] prior to my transition I didn't realize what that extended to you and to how misogynist culture is." The scene ends as the picture switches back to the close up of Grace's face, creating a comparison of the young, seemingly reckless and aggressive Tom Gabel, betwixt two reserved, still shots of the intentionally feminized Laura Jane Grace. The selection of this old footage of Gabel exaggerates traditional signifiers of masculinity: sweat, labor, sharp and harsh movement, paired with a furrowed, serious facial expression. The show's editors overlay this carefully chosen image with the words "male privilege," and "misogyny," as Grace narrates. In doing so, they create a hyper-masculinized "before" portrayal of Grace that is compared against an astonishingly serene, feminine "after."

19 The producers of *True Trans* have been highly selective in their use of particular live performance footage of Against Me!. Despite nearly two decades worth of video from many types of performances, the clips used in the series always feature the band's current lineup of personnel (excluding two significant, long term members from earlier years) performing songs from *Gender Dysphoria Blues*, the most recent album (and only album at the time) released after Grace's coming out. The footage used frequently captures Grace from behind, looking out over a sea of adoring fans who sing along to every word. Very rarely do the producers elect to show performance clips in which Grace is head banging, jumping, or dancing and playing aggressively. Avoiding any lengthy shots of Grace's classic punk performance style—essentially unchanged from that of Against Me!'s early career—the camera moves out towards the audience. Generally, these clips serve not to highlight Grace's singing or stage punk-style presence, rather,

they focus on her interaction and relationship with adoring fans. Interrogating these varied filming, editing, and sonic choices behind the *True Trans* series reveal ways in which Grace's gender identity is prescribed and even inflated, creating distinct framings that seek to manipulate and guide the experiences of viewers.

20 As Laura Jane Grace set foot on stage that May 2016 night in Durham, she acted not only as a musical idol to her fans, but also as a trailblazer for transwomen, and an engaged political activist, using her music to insight change. After playing the first few songs of the set, the band paused for Grace to ask the audience, "Anything in the news lately?" referring to the recently instated North Carolina House Bill 2. The discriminatory bill requires all North Carolinians use the designated public restroom that corresponds with the sex assigned to them at birth. Its intentions are stated in the document as:

An act to provide for single-sex multiple occupancy bathroom and changing facilities in schools and public agencies and to create statewide consistency in regulation of employment and public accommodations (*House Bill 2*).

Inherently biased, possibly the most problematic aspect of the bill is its treatment of sex and gender as a male/female dichotomy. Requiring any person to use a bathroom with which their gender identity is not aligned raises safety concerns, especially in this case for the wellbeing of those identified as gender variant, nonconforming, or transgender. Grace and the rest of Against Me! have fought against HB2, both for the safety of other gender variant people, and for the increased awareness of gender rights issues in the political sphere. Until bathroom laws can be guaranteed protective and equitable for all, "I will be peeing and shitting outside like a dog," said Grace (*Against Me! Live Performance at Motorco Music Hall, Durham*).

21 To boycott HB2 and legalized forms of oppression, many musical artists have continued to cancel tour dates across North Carolina. During their show at Motorco Music Hall in Durham, Grace paused to explain the importance of her band's choice to *play* their show as a form of protest, rather than simply opt out. Grace told audience members, "there's also a lot of point to coming here and talking about these things, [...] showing people in other states. Like, you know it's one thing to press a 'like' button on Facebook or something like that, but showing people [...] that the way you affect change is to empower the grassroots activist organizations" (*Against Me! Live Performance at Motorco Music Hall, Durham*) As she called out the injustices of laws like HB2, the audience cheered in support, rallying around Grace's message.

22 The excitement from Against Me!’s May 16, 2016 show in Durham, North Carolina rose not only out of the band’s captivating stage presence and energetic performance that evening, but also from an invigorated audience, called to action by Grace in support of urgent LGBTQ issues. The show itself took on the role of an active protest, standing up against House Bill 2’s discriminatory opposition of the basic rights of trans and gender nonconforming people. Much in the way that Laura Jane Grace’s active refusal to change the timbre of her traditionally masculine singing voice protests a conventional, limiting binary view of gender and its presumed roles, Against Me!’s refusal to cancel their concert in North Carolina gave voices to those fighting back against hateful and oppressive legislature coded into laws like House Bill 2. Laura Jane Grace sounds exactly like she used to... when she was Tom Gabel. By transgressing archaic tropes of binary gender, instead forging her own non-traditional path as a woman, Grace has undoubtedly become one of music’s most noteworthy women.

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