

# Discomfort Zone

For an overwhelming number of women, the studio feels like an anything-but-safe space — so artists and executives alike are driving new initiatives to enact real change *By Tatiana Cirisano*

**A FEW YEARS AGO, SINGER-songwriter** Jessie Reyez arrived at an evening recording session, and the men in the studio didn't quite give her the welcome she expected. They laughed at and patronized her, she recalls, "thinking I was just a girl wanting to party." It was far from her only experience feeling uncomfortable in the studio. In May 2018, she revealed that her chilling single "Gatekeeper" — in which an unnamed aggressor says to "spread your legs" and "drink up, bitch" — was inspired by an experience with star producer Noel "Detail" Fisher. (He has not commented on her claims nor did his lawyer respond to *Billboard's* request for comment.) In the studio, "it's not uncommon to have to fight for your identity as an equal," she says, "and not as a product shipped there for someone's enjoyment."

For female artists and creatives, the studio — an intimate environment where work often happens late at night and with little supervision — can be a deeply uncomfortable place where behavior ranging from obnoxious remarks to sexual harassment goes unchecked. "If you're put in the wrong person's hands, it can really be a bad experience," says singer-songwriter Victoria Monét, who has asked female friends to accompany her to late-night sessions as a "safety net."

According to a February study from the University of Southern California's Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, only 21.7% of artists, 12.3% of songwriters and 2% of producers who appeared on the *Billboard* Hot 100's year-end charts between 2012 and 2018 were women. Eighty-three percent of the 75 female songwriters and producers surveyed said that they or other women they know had experienced discomfort in the studio. Among the surveyed group, 39% said they had been objectified, 28% felt their expertise had been dis-

missed because of their gender, and 20% agreed that drugs, alcohol and sexualizing women were a part of the culture.

Producer Shakari "Trakgirl" Boles says it took her years to build up the "mental armor" to fight sexism in the studio. "You're walking into a room where you're not acknowledged," she says. "That can be really hard on mental health." In January 2018, she launched "The 7% Series," a set of panels spotlighting female producers and engineers. "I don't want the message to be, '[The studio is] a scary place, stay away,'" she adds.

Boles is just one of many in the industry who, in the wake of the #MeToo movement, are pushing forward the conversation around studio culture. "We should have contracts for anybody who goes into those settings where they have to sign a piece of paper that says, 'I will not breach your space without consent,'" says Ty Stiklorius, founder/CEO of artist-management company Friends at Work. She has raised the idea of placing posters in the studio (akin to those in public transit systems) with information about harassment. "It's the casting couch of the music business," says Stiklorius. "Publishers, labels and studios need to come up with a better plan."

The Recording Academy's Task Force on Diversity and Inclusion has considered starting a hotline, says member Terri Winston, founder/executive director of the Women's Audio Mission, which offers free audio engineering and recording courses. "We have bad apples that take up a lot of space," she says, "and we forget how many people want this to change."

Enforcement is more complicated. Last spring, a group of female and nonbinary musicians formed the We Have Voice collective and released a formal Code of Conduct to Promote SAFE(R) Workplaces in the Performing Arts for all genders, spelling out the legal definition of sexual harassment and guidelines for improving

studio safety. "We were tired of absorbing [#MeToo] news and stories without a positive action," says member Sara Serpa, a vocalist-composer.

Fifty-nine institutions across the globe have adopted the code — though, so far, just one recording studio: Crew Studios in Vancouver. Studio manager Andy Warren says that he sought out We Have Voice after glimpsing a producer physically pushing a young female artist at Crew and feeling powerless to help. "Having us all talk about those things and having a document — if that situation comes up again, I know exactly what I would do," he says. He has since added a clause to it reserving the right to terminate a session if improper behavior is observed or reported.

Other studio owners have simply taken matters into their own hands. "Every studio I've worked in has felt like a man cave," says songwriter-producer-engineer Alaina Moore of the band Tennis. So she designed and built her own. "I wanted a studio that reflected me," she says. "The entire space says that women are welcome and that a woman's point of view is valued."

Some industry veterans say they're seeing progress. "Ten years ago, if you were a female in the studio, you were either a girlfriend or a groupie — that's what people assumed," says Atlantic Records GM/senior vp urban A&R Lanre Gaba. "The respect level for women in creative spaces has changed."

For now, younger artists like Reyez are looking to both male and female colleagues to be allies. "If you're in the studio and one of your boys humiliates a girl, speak up," she says. "It helps me feel more confident knowing that Kehlani, H.E.R. and [Universal Music Group executive vp] Michele Anthony move in a way that's respectable and strong. That encourages other women to be like, 'I want to feel that too.'"

*Additional reporting by Lyndsey Havens.*

## THE WRITING'S ON THE WALL

**TY STIKLORIUS** HAS SUGGESTED PUBLIC-TRANSTITUTE POSTERS IN THE STUDIO COULD HELP REDUCE INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR. SHE AND THREE BEHIND-THE-SCENES TALENTS IMAGINE WHAT THEY COULD LOOK LIKE



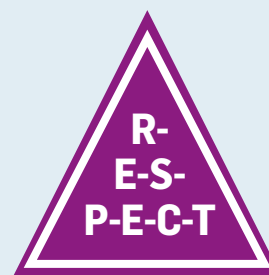
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