

# Movers, shakers and changemakers

Even in 2019, there is still a shocking gender imbalance in the music industry. To mark International Women's Day on March 8, **Jane Cornwell** speaks to the female pioneers changing the face of the business

**C**all it what you will: world music. International music. Music from elsewhere. Call it open-minded, peace-loving, a window to cross-cultural understanding. Then peer behind the scenes. Don't even *think* about calling it gender-inclusive. Women have long been vastly under-represented in the music industry and world music, alas, is no different.

According to the PRS Foundation, the music industry – all of it – has a 70/30% gender divide. Sure, women are there on stage, from Angélique, Rokia and Fatou to Totó and Oumou. But the nuts and bolts of the biz – the record producing, sound engineering, agenting, managing – is largely done by men.

The time is way overdue, then, to shine a light on some UK-based women who, fired by passion and know-how, have forged wildly successful careers in the face of formidable odds. It's a herstory that needs telling.

"Women need to be recognised as people who can be seriously involved in music, other than just as artists or promoters," says the ethnomusicologist, musician, radio presenter and record producer Lucy Durán, a pivotal – and inarguably underrated – figure in world music.

"I mean, this is 2019," she says. "It's the era of #MeToo. Women have made incredible progress in the countries of the West, but these deep residual prejudices remain. If you are a woman in the studio, especially if you're not on the mixing desk but are negotiating the sound, style and repertoire with the musicians, you are generally not acknowledged."

A major scholarly voice on Cuban music and Mande music, particularly that of Mali and the women of West Africa, Durán has produced and co-produced a staggering 22 albums to date, three of which – 2002's *Kassi Kasse – Mande Music from Mali* (by Kasse Mady Diabaté), 2009's *I Speak Fula* (Bassekou Kouyaté & Ngoni ba) and 2014's *Toumani & Sidiki* (Toumani and Sidiki

Diabaté) – were Grammy nominated. She was lead presenter for BBC Radio 3's *World Routes* programme for its entire 13-year run; is a professor of music at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) and the creator of Trio Da Kali, the voice-*balafon-ngoni* group whose album with Kronos Quartet, 2017's *Ladilikan*, which Durán co-produced, attracted five-star reviews.

Yet, Durán is not nearly as well-known as she should be. Even this estimable magazine got it wrong when it omitted all mention of her in a précis of *Ladilikan* tied to the *Songlines Music Awards* in 2018, citing only co-producer Nick Gold and violinist David Harrington. Durán, a regular visitor to Mali since 1986, sighs before explaining the album's division of labour: "David knows about what does and doesn't work with string quartets. Nick, who runs the World Circuit label, has his own brilliant take on what he thinks makes a great album.

"My role is that of an interventionist," continues the Spanish/American Durán, whose childhood was spent in several countries including Greece, Spain and Cuba. "I'm interested in representing a continuity with tradition using a contemporary voice, and I know Trio Da Kali and their repertoire inside out. So during a take I'll say 'That's great but you can do better,' without adding my own sound as producers like Brian Eno or Damon Albarn might do."

Durán can only cite male producers, because that is all there are. Indeed, a report issued on behalf of Keychange, the initiative commissioned by the PRS Foundation, found that in a survey of 600 popular songs, a mere two per cent of them were produced by women. Shift the lens to world music, and Lucy Durán remains the only high-profile (and too often invisible) name: "Even when I was in Athens, Georgia in the late 90s co-producing *Kulanjan*," – the collaboration between blues guitarist Taj Mahal and Malian *kora* player Toumani Diabaté, cited by Barack Obama as one of his all-

Lucy Durán presenting Bassekou Kouyaté with his 2008 BBC Radio 3 Award for World Music for *Segu Blue*, produced by Durán and released by Jay Rutledge of Out Here Records



time favourites – "the studio engineer told me he'd never met another female producer in the 20 years he'd been there."

Vanessa Reed, executive director of the PRS Foundation and a trailblazer in her own right (last year she came third after Beyoncé and Taylor Swift on the BBC Radio 4 *Woman's Hour* Power List), insists on the need to promote women behind the scenes as role models for the next generation. "There are so few of them," she says. "We have to balance the whole ecology. We know from our Women Make Music network that the male-dominated nature of the workforce is off-putting to many female artists, who often then tend to give up."

The power generated by a safe space, by the creation of a meaningful sisterhood, should not be underestimated, Reed continues. "Too many artists experience feelings of isolation, and a woman who is working in an environment that is mostly men can still feel very much alone."

Still, like Durán, the internationally respected sound engineer Maxine Gilmore only ever saw herself as a person, right from starting out as a teenaged techie in the 80s. "I just got on with the work," says this daughter of a Notting Hill electronic engineer, whose love for music of all genres informed her taste early on. "My first gigs were with people like Asian Dub Foundation, who were also of colour and of similar working-class backgrounds, and that felt very supportive.

"I worked as a studio engineer initially, sometimes for companies," she continues, "and I'd always see the inner panic in the eyes of a band that didn't expect a black female engineer to be mixing their sound."

The change in behaviour as sessions progressed became a pattern: "I'd make a fuss and once they realised I knew what I was doing they'd relax and be like 'Great, Max!'" grins Gilmore, who eventually moved into live work, revelling in the challenge of creating on the fly at gigs and festivals including WOMAD. Her CV spans an impressive list of artists including Ray Charles, Rokia Traoré, Robert Plant and Susheela Raman, with whom Gilmore has collaborated for 16 years.

But while many artists specifically request Gilmore on the desk, there are still instances where she is made to feel aware of her gender and/or skin colour. There was the time she attracted a small crowd of male observers while setting up for a gig with Courtney Pine in Tunisia, for example. Or all the times she's been mistaken for a backing vocalist. Or the run-in she had, onstage at an established London venue in 2015, with a [low-

profile] Spanish guitarist who'd been difficult from the get-go. "I'd already sensed some discrimination from him during rehearsals," she remembers. "When you're of colour it's a sort of smell. He'd decided he didn't like my talent, gender or race. I was tolerated over the two days of rehearsals but mid-concert he threw a wireless IEM (in-ear monitor) at me while his band were sort of hanging their heads and looking embarrassed."

For the most part, however, Gilmore's career path – including the transition from analogue to digital – has been smooth: "There are some guys who might see me as a novelty but the companies I've worked for have all treated me as an equal. I didn't have encouragement when I was breaking into the business, though. One thing I'm adamant about is trying to give back." ▶

**"the studio engineer told me he'd never met another female producer in the 20 years he'd been there"**

The stereotype of the nerdy male techie and indeed, the male label boss, is being stealthily dismantled by redoubtable organisations such as Real World Records, whose head honcho Amanda Jones has, since the 80s, overseen a vibrant roster of acts from Joi and Youssou N'Dour to the female supergroup Les Amazones d'Afrique and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Jones recalls visiting the late, great *qawwali* icon at home in Pakistan in the early 90s and being forbidden, as a woman, from entering a Sufi shrine; their all-male French crew was ushered inside.

"Undoubtedly when you are a woman working with artists from other cultures, expectations of women can be very different," says Jones, who credits her partner's willingness to be a full-time father to their children as one of the keys to her success. "Similarly, I've encountered male managers of artists who are uncomfortable dealing with women who are making business decisions. I've just gone with the flow. But I suppose I am proof that it is possible for women to engage and retain these positions. Male or female, it makes no difference."

Real World Studios has employed several female recording engineers over the years, she says, but the majority of those applying or passing through are still men. "But there are far more technical courses being offered in higher education these days. Right now we have a brilliant female student on placement from the music and sound recording course at the University of Surrey."

Pelin Opcin, director of programming at Serious, producers of the EFG London Jazz Festival, cites her company's development programme Young & Serious as an example



of their commitment to investing in a gender-balanced future: "It gives young people, particularly young women, the opportunity to work with talented events producers such as our own head of production, Trish Brown." Over at female-run music producers Sound UK, co-director Polly Eldridge muses that the qualities traditionally deemed 'feminine' (the tendency to nurture, the ability to multitask) can be positive and negative – and also untrue.

"Sometimes we get too bogged down in details like helping to load out a gig or making cups of tea for the artists," admits Eldridge, who with Sound UK has worked with acts including folksters The Unthanks and Finnish accordionist Kimmo Pohjonen. "But we remind ourselves that we got into this to promote what used to be viewed as 'niche' or 'cross-genre,' the less viably commercial stuff that we absolutely love."

A similar enthusiasm motivated uber-agent Clementine Bunel to represent 'world' artists such as Orchestra Baobab, who even in the mid 2000s were still being given early afternoon slots at large indie festivals such as Glastonbury or Primavera, playing before crowds of, well, virtually no one. Bunel had grown up in various African countries in a music-obsessed French family; she was a tour manager in Europe before quitting studies in Paris to work as an agent in London where she is currently employed by (the gender-balanced) Coda Music Agency, helming a diverse roster including established acts such as Oumou Sangaré and Stromae, and rising stars Nérija and Nakhane.



London-based agent Clementine Bunel pictured at Linecheck Festival in Milan, 2018. Above: Polly Eldridge

ROFR Studio



Clockwise from right: Vanessa Reed speaking at the Keychange launch; sound engineer Maxine Gilmore, Serious programming director, Pelin Opcin and Real World's Amanda Jones with Dengue Fever



Mike Massaro



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"Evolving in an industry in a country where English was not my first language, and then fighting for artists who are black and generally don't sing in English wasn't easy," Bunel says. "But I wanted to push these artists whose stories are so multilayered, interesting and different to the stuff we are fed by the mainstream."

"I would get called 'baby girl' and 'darling' by male managers wanting more money than I was offering the artist, and it took me a while to have the confidence to snap back at them. I wish I'd done it sooner. What I'm seeing more of now is female artists self-releasing records and managing themselves. But there's still an assumption that if you're an assertive woman you're going to be tricky, or a diva, when you're really just a normal person."

It's a sentiment echoed by Durán, who – cognisant of the cultural background of the music, has rolled up her sleeves in the studio, taken the lion's share of work and engaged with musicians in ways that affect the final product – should be celebrated as a salient enabler in the world music movement.

But for her, as for the majority of women mentioned above, the music is their motivation and muse. "I was always thinking, 'How do we give a platform to this music that isn't commercial?'" says Durán. "How do we talk to the musicians and get their impressions, their history?"

But credit where credit's due. If more women are going to want to work behind the scenes in world music, then the women who are already working there, who have been championing, engaging, slogging away, truly need to be seen. ♦