



INTERVIEW

# Laura Marling Doesn't Avoid the “Being a Woman in Music” Question



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**She reflects on podcasting, gender and why she feels more free on the road in America than in England.**

**L**aura Marling has a podcast, which is not an unexpected move for a musician or anybody else in 2017. Still, it clashes slightly with the image I have of her, the twee folk artist of my teenage bedroom. Laura Marling was a staple of my high school *NME* phase – she was friends with the Klaxons, for God's sake. She was on that Noah and the Whale song. The fact that she's still making music, let alone a podcast, when the scene that raised her has been dead for years, is unusual.

Or it would be, if she were a singer in a mediocre guitar band. She's far from that. Marling is a quiet achiever – literally, a lot of her music is very quiet – who's steadily released delicate folk and rock songs since breaking out as an 18-year-old prodigy in 2008. Now she has the podcast, as well as a new album. Both, she tells me, are about women in music. Which means our interview is about to enter the problematic arena of "girl with guitar" questions. Not that either of us, I think, really mind.

One project focuses on gender more literally than the other. The podcast Marling recorded last year, *Reversal of the Muse*, is ostensibly an interview series about the role of women in the recording studio. Marling started out with a premise that's familiar in the feminist girl power podcast genre: she wanted to shine a spotlight on female talent, with the aim of taking affirmative action and asking pertinent questions about why we don't see more women behind the mixing desk. Very standard stuff. But the results were different to what she anticipated.

"I was waiting for a great discovery that I would make, but that didn't happen. I actually don't know the difference, there's no difference in which the way men and women make music. It's a technical ability, to be an engineer or a producer. A musical ability. So I do think that it's a positive thing for women to get in there, but there's no reason why they are not, there's no great difference. I think we just have to open the doors for women to get there. In the more business side of the music industry, there definitely has to be more women," she says carefully.

You get the feeling this discovery – not disillusionment, exactly, but something subtler – influenced the music. What Marling sought in her new album (and the hint is in the title, *Semper Femina*, taken from Aeneid) is a sense of femininity. But that was nothing to do with getting an all-girl band together or seeking out a female producer. "A lot of people, leading up to the release of this album, were like 'Why did you decide to work with a man if you're so into woman working in the music business? Why can't you find a woman to produce the record?' I was just like, that's not the point."

And the album, produced by American guitarist Blake Mills, does feel feminine – well, if you take feminine to mean soft and gentle. It's a brief nine tracks long, and the lyrics accompanied by tactically employed string sections conjure slow sunrises and contemplative mornings spent in the pastoral English countryside. Sure, "Soothing" sounds a little bit Portishead, but it's all still unmistakably Marling. The strange mystique of her voice is as unique and double-take-inducing as it was on *Alas I Cannot Swim*. Yet the album's sense of quiet, she says, is "All Blake. He's amazing and created this amazing gentle pastel tone."

## **"I hate being called a female songwriter, but that's my Facebook genre name".**

Marling hasn't always been so eager to embrace pastel. Her previous album *Short Movie* was a marked change of pace from what had gone before, and a familiar attempt to gain some rock cred and experiment with growling guitars and vocals. She says it was a direct reaction to the fact that female singer songwriter label kept sticking.

"I hate being called a female songwriter, but that's my Facebook genre name," she says. "That's what led me eventually to that very masculine tone, as I felt that in some way femininity has jeopardised my singularity, or whatever." She worked against it in other ways, too. "I did quite a lot of work to distant myself from the way I was portrayed in the media. I don't do fashion shoots; I don't wear makeup when I have my photo taken. And for that reason, not many people want to take my photo. I try to keep a sense of ownership over my appearance."

When I comment on how sad it feels that she had to take those measures, Marling agrees. Folk music is a genre particularly susceptible to gender bias. You've got your troubadour bros on one end of the scale and your breathy ukulele ladies on the other. Fraught territory, but Marling is finally coming to terms with the fact she has no control and just making the music she wants to

make. The freak folk scene in America has been a particularly welcoming influence. "I grew up on 60s music, but my first contemporary music love was Diane Cluck. She'll collect money in a hat at shows and just do her thing traveling around America."

Marling has taken on that spirit of independence too. "In America I do a lot of touring of my own now too. It doesn't freak anyone one out, and I count the money after show. That feels OK. But if in England, you do that by myself, it's different. They can't quite get their head around you traveling on your own. That's really interesting to me. So in America, I do have a bit more freedom to be more independent, in a non-gendered sense. In England it's much more difficult."

The disparity of experience Marling feels with male musician colleagues, she says, "Has become more obvious over time. It's a subtle thing." But the best plan might just be to ignore it and not think too hard about gender at all. What Marling wants at heart is the same thing most musicians do – individuality, the freedom to be weird.

"In the past couple of years I've met so many people who are much more liberated than me. There's a lot of great crazy people making music out there, and I think those people need support, and they need a safe environment to be a true individual. I think those eccentrics need a safe place."

To be a female singer songwriter and a weirdo, though?

"It's a very vulnerable place to be."