

## TO BE MANY THINGS

by Gian Slater\*

---

*[The following are the acclaimed vocalist/composer's personal reflections on female identity and music for International Women's Day circa March, 2020]*



*Gian Slater: since childhood, music has been my means to self-discovery and self-acceptance... PHOTO COURTESY MELBOURNE JAZZ CO-OPERATIVE*

I am a mother, partner, daughter, sister, musician, composer, vocalist, improviser, introvert, listener, reader, dreamer, poet. I am vulnerable, sensitive, strong, willful, self-conscious, ambitious, empathetic, hard working, anxious – I am a complex person, as are you.

Being a woman is a part of who I am, and some of the joys and challenges in my life have certainly stemmed from my gender. However, viewing my life through one lens – even one as fundamental as gender – seems to minimise those aspects of my identity that feel most relevant. And for me, the most important of these aspects is music.

---

*\*Gian Slater is a prolific vocalist and composer with an approach that incorporates wordless singing and improvisation; songwriting; electronics and extended vocal techniques; new music and contemporary composition and collaborations with theatre and dance practitioners.*

Since childhood, music has been my means to self-discovery and self-acceptance. It has sparked my curiosity time and again, and empowered me to feel courageous in the world. It has been cathartic in times of grief and struggle. The friendship and community I have found in music have given me the social connection, inspiration and support that I struggled to find in other areas of life.

The inter-generational mix of senior, mid-career and emerging musicians working together is endlessly inspiring.

Music is a difficult career path, but I can't think of a life without it. To me, this rich notion of music is a more vivid part of my identity than my gender, however the expectations and assumptions placed on me as a woman-in-music are an ever-present part of my experience.



*Slater: my musicianship and knowledge have been routinely underestimated...*

*PHOTO CREDIT ROGER MITCHELL*

As a female vocalist, I have of course endured gross stereotyping and outdated assumptions about singers throughout my career. I am a musician who is responsible for every aspect of my music, yet my musicianship and knowledge have been routinely underestimated. (In reviewing my original music, critics have assumed my male band mates have composed or directed the music, or fixated about the way I look, or been simply perplexed that I do not conform to typical female jazz singer tropes).

Since becoming a mother, navigating my career alongside the assumptions of colleagues, employers and family has been my greatest challenge as a woman. I have been excluded from or replaced in major projects, based on an assumption I am not working, or that I am probably too busy being a Mum. Or perversely, I have also been

offered sub-par work assuming that I will be grateful to “get back in the game”. In my work as a sessional university teacher, I am appalled by the lack of policy around maternity leave and re-entry. This as-yet unscrutinised institutional oversight has seen many women returning with little to no work following their ‘unofficial’ maternity leave.



*Slater (foreground) pictured here with members of her trio, Nathan Slater & Christopher Hale...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN*

These assumptions haven't changed the way I make music, but have certainly distracted and frustrated me along the way. I am indebted to the people in my life who value the person I am and the music I make, beyond my gender. Their encouragement and support is my backbone. I hope everyone on a creative path can feel a village like this around them in some way.

While there is unity in some shared female experiences across generations, cultural backgrounds and personalities, there are of course also differences in perspective. To express in writing the nuances of our individual and collective experience is profoundly difficult. For me and so many other artists, these nuances of experience are embedded in our work: in music, our stories are abstract, yet we reveal deep parts of ourselves in their sharing.

Music gave me a language to understand complexity in myself, and a possibility to offer my individuality to others in a way that does not try to reduce that complexity. Music doesn't seek to tell people what to think. With music we give audiences a space apart from their daily lives to think or dream into; to have their own thoughts, to be complex, to be many things at once.