

More self reflection than I bargained for – Mother by Idles

Frances van der Horst

Mother is the third track on the album *Brutalism* by the highly political British (post-)punk band Idles. The album, which came out in 2017, is a 42-minute long critique on the state of the English National Healthcare System, class struggles and male rage. But mostly, an ode to vocalist Joe Talbot's mother and the other women that hold places in his life.

Women and their struggles with gender inequality are what inspired this song, *Mother*. Vocalist Joe Talbot explained how being raised by a single mother opened his eyes to the existence of gender inequality, as he did not understand how certain jokes could be made about women who, like his mother, worked fifteen hours a day to provide for their children. About two and a half minutes into this song filled with raw bass guitar and slamming drums, we hear Joe Talbot's raw voice sing of another part of gender inequality: the sexual violence many women have experienced.

Sexual violence doesn't start and end with rape,
It starts in our books and behind our school gates.
Men are scared women will laugh in their face,
whereas women are scared it's their lives men will take.

The lyrics of this song demonstrate us two things, first: sexual violence is the systemic proof of an imbalanced world. Second: sexual violence differentiates women from men through the gendered prevalence of their experiences.

The lyrics of this song had an impact on me. Now, while writing about that impact, I feel like I once again need to provide evidence that the experience of sexual violence is not that uncommon for most women, as I have had to do in many conversations over the years. However, this knowledge is easily accessible to anyone willing to put in a little effort, whether through listening and believing women's stories or researching the subject.

I would much rather write here why these lyrics impact me personally: they make me reflect on my own gender through the lens of my first and second hand experiences with gendered violence. This started the second that my body gifted me breasts: I lost my childhood, innocence and obliviousness to my gendered identity. It was at that moment that I increasingly noticed stares drifting to the area of my chest, whistles when I walked by, and I started being called at as if I was a dog that needed correcting. It was this time that my mother, driven by her own traumas, taught me to "hit 'em in the nose and then punch 'em in the balls, scream and run away". It was when I got my first mobile phone to assure my safety when I biked home. It was all the times that I experienced gendered violence because I am a woman.

Gendered by the outside world, that reads me, assumes my sexuality and treats me accordingly. My womanhood is not inherent, it is politically given: given and coloured by my shared experiences with others. Idles' lyrics are like a tool that can be used to reflect on what seems given. Their lyrics may seem simple, but in simplicity lies a power: a sentence is crushed down into the most efficient form, leaving space for your mind to drift and for you to reflect. Their music does not distract, it is powerful and it awakens a certain energy in you, it exposes you to political anger targeted at injustice.

It offers you a chance to reflect on the world and the role you have in it, as it did for myself. It has offered me more self reflection than I had bargained for when I first played their song, more than I knew I needed. This is a common effect Idles' songs seem to have, proven by an online fanbase community of 31,5K members that openly discuss

their struggles with toxic masculinity, health and all that weighs on them. That's the influence such powerful lyrics can have.



About the author

Frances-Luna Van der Horst studies Art & Research at AKV St. Joost Den Bosch. Recently, she completed a minor in Gender & Diversity at the Radboud University. The main themes that move Van der Horst in her art are the disappearing of local subcultures and identities, issues of poverty and the processing of (gendered) trauma.