



Cover art for Hole's 1994 album *Live Through This*, courtesy of DGC Records; photo illustrations by Matt Ortlie



Vivian Lee  
Jan 22, 2019



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ARTS & CULTURE | MUSIC

## As a Woman of Color, I'm Told I

Courtney Love's 1994 album *Live Through This*, courtesy of DGC Records; photo illustrations by Matt Ortlie

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## As a Woman of Color, I'm Told I Can't Show Anger—So I Let Courtney Love Do it for Me

**Because it's still more acceptable for white women than it is for women of color to show anger, I scream-sing along to Courtney Love's rage.**

Every time another man accused of sexually assaulting a woman is given even more power, I turn to music, which is what I do in any situation. When I first began this habit, I knew I wanted something to channel my anger. I am not soft-spoken, but I also can't remember the last time I have actually screamed. But that was what I wanted to do; and to find music to which I could do so.

I started to listen to Hole.

I blame not having a cool older sister on the fact that only in my thirties did I finally really listen to this band, best known for its alt-rock stylings and its larger-than-life member Courtney Love. But maybe I wouldn't have listened to Hole with this specific framework, since it would have been tinged with nostalgia. Nevertheless, I started to listen specifically to the album *Live Through This*, which opens up with the song "Violet".

In 1993, before performing the song on *Later... with Jools Holland*, Courtney Love introduced it by saying, "This is a song about a jerk. I hexed him and now he's losing his hair." Billy Corgan is still bald.

So I knew, for Courtney, this song was about a man (or men who behave badly), about a relationship (in any form) gone sour. However, I also heard—in these lyrics—the words I'd repeat whenever I would beat myself up over being in an emotionally abusive relationship for too long.

*You should learn when to go / You should learn how to say 'no'*

The first time she utters the first line, it sounds like a gentle prodding, until it's not. It is an anguished yawp.

When I finally left the relationship, he told me that everything he did to me did not actually happen—that it was all in my head.

*Yeah, I'm the one with no soul*

When I see women testify against their rapists, all I want to do is cry for them. They must be strong, they can't show any anger, they can't lose control. Men ask why women don't just say no. But is that really the problem?

\*

I started listening to Hole that day and then, for weeks on end, I couldn't listen to anything else. It was hypnotizing, her anger. It started to play to me like a tape on loop. Because I had been told by my elders, by bosses, by strangers, that to show emotion was to show weakness. To ask for help was a sign of weakness. My therapist told me that while I couldn't change how people acted, I could change how I reacted.

I think what made me grab onto Hole, in particular, this song, was that although they *performed* this song to an audience, you could tell—that is, you actually know—that Courtney Love is like this offstage, too. Her anger is not a persona. She is screaming directly at you even if there may not be a microphone. I can't even be as angry as I want here, but singing through her even in the privacy of my own home is a nice start. Because, really, I don't want to just be loud—I want to scream.



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And so, I listened to Hole repeatedly because I want the power that Courtney has when she's singing. She is still so in control vocally and so I channel my anger into scream-singing along because I need a cipher; because it's still more acceptable for white women than it is for women of color to show anger.

I once had a white colleague who, after I squinted and said I couldn't see what they were holding, said that the reason I probably couldn't see it was because of the way my eyes were shaped. Immediately, as if my next breath depended on it, I said that was racist and they volleyed it back to me with "it was a joke." As if my showing anger had been what was offensive.

I once had a colleague who kept referring to a predominantly black neighborhood as "ghetto" in a marketing meeting. When I asked them what the reasoning for that was, I was met with silence and then they moved on. Later, I would break it down with a black colleague and we would cry over the phone. They demand our forgiveness before they've even asked for it.

I once had a white colleague tell me that I should speak up in meetings, that my voice was important. A few years later, I finally had the courage to do so and, afterward, I was told I was not trustworthy. Because to challenge power as a woman of color is to be seen as chaos, as anger.

I once had a white colleague who told me about something racist they did when they were younger and, with their eyes, pleaded me to forgive their past transgressions. An author of mine told me that this was what being an oracle now meant—in which white people will confess their sins to her, a brown person, as some sort of atonement.

My shoulders are not broad and I cannot carry the weight of your guilt while I am also carrying the burdens of my ancestors. I cannot mark your body with the sign of the cross and absolve you of your sins—although what you have told me will be another pebble in my pocket. I can't tell you that you have added to my mental load because you will be too scared to listen to my truth; you are not used to such a burden, to being a burden.

*Well they get what they want / and they never want it again*

\*

In my quest to devour everything from Hole's oeuvre, I stumbled across their [Saturday Night Live performance](#) from 1994. In it, they segue from "Violet" in a few tonal strums to a cover of The Crystals' "He Hit Me (And It Felt Like a Kiss)."

If you haven't heard the original, it is, on first listen, sonically romantic. It has the fuzzy wall of sound, the strings, and the harmonies that were a Phil Spector trademark. It is a catchy song if you don't want to listen to the lyrics—if you want to just hear that we are thriving, that we are exceptional. It's easier to be quiet and docile because, while you want to be a good person, you don't actually want to hear the violence underneath.

What Hole has done by covering The Crystals is to ground "He Hit Me (And It Felt Like a Kiss)" to its absolute sentiments. Abuse of power can be intoxicating, you may go back for more, but in the end, it is slow and painful. It chips at you even if you don't want it to.

\*

The video for "Violet" comprises of various scenes of different women on stage, performing. There is a children's pageant, women half-naked posing on fainting couches like old paintings, elegant ballet dancers, burlesque and pole dancers, and the actual band playing the song. All of these are feminine performances—and all the while, various scenes cut to men staring, laughing, pointing, leering.

Female anger—for those who don't care to understand—looks performative because it is not happening to them. While you can only control what you do on stage, nothing you do can prepare for what the audience reacts. My therapist keeps telling me to change my mental framework around how I take in anger, but what if the stage isn't enough of a boundary?

If I do my best—be quiet, smile, be agreeable—and perform like a good person of color *should*, like a woman *should*, like a woman of color *should*, what happens to all the tiny pains I have to carry—pains that aren't even given a second notice by others?

*Might last a day, yeah / Mine is forever*

They say trauma is hereditary. I have already cursed my future generations.

\*

Why do we have to be sorry when we're not sorry?

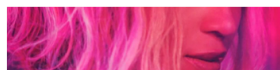


**Vivian Lee**

Vivian Lee is a book editor and writer based in New York. Her work can be found in The Los Angeles Times, Eater, The Rumpus, and more. Follow her on Twitter @vivianwlee or on the internet at vivianwlee.com.

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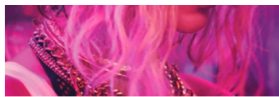


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