

Early death in female popular musicians

August 24 2016, by Dianna Theadora Kenny And Anthony Asher



Janis Joplin in Janis: Little Girl Blue (2015)

In her 2005 memoir [Pleasure and Pain: My Life](#), singer Chrissie Amphlett reflected on the "the dreadful scenes, the despair and remorse, the damage I did to my mind and body, and to others' minds and bodies" during her time with the influential 1980s rock band, The Divinyls.

"Not that I'm apologising for a thing," said the recovering alcoholic and drug addict. "I never, ever apologise."

With her sultry voice and steely on-stage persona, Amphlett was one of

the greats of Australian rock. She [died of breast cancer in 2013 at the age of 53](#).

Amphlett is one of the most recent examples of women popular musicians who have died too young. Were Amphlett and others such as Janis Joplin and Amy Winehouse (who both died at 27), Karen Carpenter (33), Judee Sill (35), Dinah Washington (39), and Whitney Houston (45) exceptions?

Or do women in popular music die younger – and from more unnatural causes like suicide, homicide and accidents – than women in the [general population](#)?

The answer, sadly, is yes. Unlike women in general population studies who consistently outlive men, female popular musicians suffer earlier mortality that is comparable with their male popular musician peers.

The female popular musician population

We studied over 13,000 popular musicians who died between 1950 and 2014. There were significant differences in cause of death by music genre membership. Here we report on gender differences.

In our sample of 13,191 deceased popular musicians, 9.8% were female.

Chart one (below) plots the ages at death for male and female popular musicians against the ages of death for males and females in the general US population. Both male and female mortality curves far exceeded those for the general population up to the age of 65.

This chart also shows that the differences in the patterns of age at death between popular musicians and the general population are much larger than the differences between male and female popular musicians.

Male and female ages at death

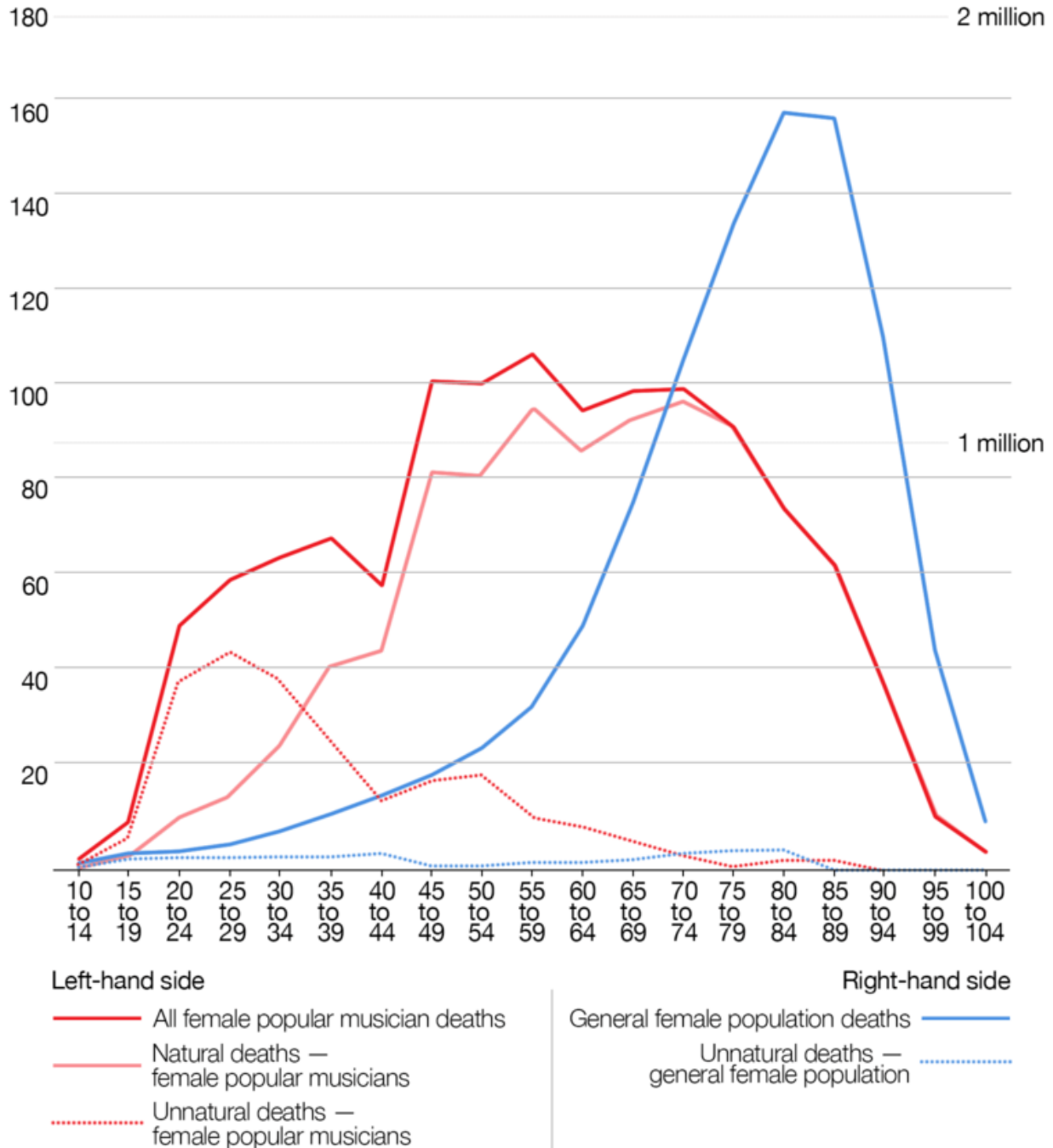
General population versus popular musicians



Chart two below plots the rates of all deaths and natural and unnatural deaths for female popular musicians against the same female population curves. The proportion of both natural and unnatural deaths in female popular musicians far exceeded those of the general female population up to 75 years of age.

Female popular musician deaths

All deaths versus deaths from natural and unnatural causes



Even the pattern of so-called natural deaths points to riskier lifestyles. Breast cancer, which has claimed, among others, Minnie Ripperton (31), Puma Jones (36), Rachel Bissex (48), Chrissie Amphlett (53), Linda McCartney (56), Dusty Springfield (60), and Phyllis Carr (66), is double the rate in female popular musicians compared with the general female population.

The same applies to throat cancer. Both of these cancers have been associated with excessive alcohol consumption.

What is wrong with the popular music industry?

Some of the systemic problems in the pop music industry were outlined in a previous article in the Death and Dying series. Added here are some more specific issues reported by musicians.

Drug and alcohol availability and abuse is endemic to an industry where workers lead high-octane, peripatetic lives.

They need help coping with the glare of the spotlight. Many suffer from [performance anxiety](#), for which they self-medicate. Musicians are often perfectionists who feel acutely the shame of a less than perfect performance.

They also suffer the chronic stress of those who are expected to make every song, every studio session, and every concert a financial and popular success.

Even the loud, the bold and the outrageous have to find ways of managing their vulnerabilities. Chrissie Amphlett invented a "theatrical persona" (fuelled by alcohol and drugs) for her edgy songs in order to overcome her performance nerves.

Spending so much time touring strains and fractures intimate relationships and disrupts social networks. Many experience chronic loneliness and dislocation, having no one on tour in whom they can confide. Although musicians are surrounded by people on tour (promoters, managers, roadies, minders), these people may have no genuine interest in their welfare.

Working like a shift worker for long periods on tour can disturb natural biorhythms. This may result in chronic insomnia and lethargy for which artists use uppers during the day and downers during the night to bring on merciful sleep.

Rivalry with other musicians and the struggle to develop one's own recognisable "brand" in a saturated market is also a chronic stressor.

The inherent risks in the popular music world cast their 'evil' spell equally over male and female popular musicians. Equality of early death was surely not what the feminist movement had in mind when lobbying for equal rights and opportunity for women in the workforce.

The music industry needs to consider these findings to discover ways of recognising and assisting young musicians who are distressed, in crisis, depressed or suicidal.

Those who make their living from popular musicians need to recognise early warning signs and implement supportive policies and practices to provide the necessary assistance and care.

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